The Logic of Bone:

The Written Word of Constantina

Constantina E. 2026

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A Note to the Reader

This collection is an autopsy of the self, documented through a series of "Reasons."

Words written as a prosimetrum, combining the rhythmic frequency of poetry with the grounding logic of prose. This is a hybrid documentation, part clinical record, part fragmented memory. It maps the transition from childhood hunger to adult dissociation. It rejects the myth of absolution and the false promise of "healing" in favor of the unyielding logic of bone.

These Six Reasons serve as the overhead map of this dossier. They categorize trauma not by when it happened, but by its impact. Piece by piece and fracture by fracture, these pages track exactly how the statue was carved.

There are no meaningless words here to soften the blow. There is no alphabet soup of recovery jargon to offer comfort. This is the roadkill. It does not adhere to standard narratives of resilience or closure.

Content note: This book contains firsthand accounts of childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, physical abuse, neglect and food deprivation, domestic violence, and suicide, including the author's own suicide attempts and the death of her brother. Resources for readers appear on the last page.

By proceeding, you agree to witness the evidence exactly as it is

unhealed and unyielding.

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Introduction

About the Author: Constantina is a retired educator and writer living in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. She holds a degree in Elementary Education, and her post-graduate work focused specifically on Gifted and Talented Education.

Beyond her academic and creative pursuits, her work is grounded in a deep commitment to family legacy. She is the mother of four adult children and a grandmother.

The Logic of Bone

Bone records what flesh cannot. Flesh bruises, heals, adapts, and forgets. Bone carries the evidence of pressure long after the injury itself has passed. It preserves fracture, stress, density, and change.

Logic of Bone is not an attempt to recover an untouched self or reconstruct a perfect memory. It is an examination of what remains after extreme pressure reshapes a life. This work is written in a unique and stylized form called a prosimetrum — a centuries-old structure that weaves poetry and prose together as a single document.

The poetry is the bone: the structure, the permanent record. The In-between is the marrow: what lives inside it. The context, reflection, and meaning contained within it. Together they document not only what happened, but what survived.

The Prologue

"I was born into a war of syllables, a flag planted in a soil of spite. These are the reasons I broke myself, too.”

The Six Reasons

The first was a parent—the venom at the start,
Who locked me and starved me and gutted my heart.
I was cursed long before I had even been named,
A life that was tethered, and broken, and blamed.

The second was hurtful hands, never my own,
Who carved out their power in marrow and bone.
With scars and with fissures that never quite heal,
I was marred so deeply I ceased to feel.

The third was the result, the blind and the cold,
A story of silence that I never was told.
No hand for the rescue, no hope for the cure,
Just a lesson in all that a soul can endure.

The fourth was the anchor, the flicker of light,
The taste of shared peanut butter, late in the night.
The only thing holding the weight of the sky—
But he lost his grasp, and he left me to die.

The fifth is the mirror, the face in the glass,
Watching the days and the agonies pass.
I wish that reflection was where I had stayed,
For I’ve reached the end... and I fear what was made.

The sixth is the gravity, the weight of the line,
The slow-soaking rain of a spirit’s decline.
Survival is not a victory to be won,
But the clinical account when the damage is done

These are the reasons I broke myself, too.

In-between: This began with a question from a therapist. She asked why I thought I was broken. I was searching for a "Lustered" answer—a standard narrative of trauma and recovery. How could I answer that question? I didn't have one. Instead, I spent the next few days evaluating the damage. I stopped looking for a cure and started documenting the structural failure. This poem is the forensic result.

Reason 1: The Primary Source

The house was the first instrument. Before I had language for what was being done, I had the ceiling — one fixed point above the chaos. This is where the statue learned to stand.

Connie

I was the fracture, the "Constantina" addition,
A daughter born from a spiteful ambition.
A sister's child claimed the "Connie" as right,
Dragging a private dispute to the light.

But "stolen" was only a matter of pride,
A war of opinions with nowhere to hide.
Was the name for the first girl they saw,
Or the first of the oldest? An unwritten law.

So the eldest son, the first of his line,
Carved "Constantina" and claimed it was mine.
He lengthened the name to win back the war,
A four-beat defiance, a grudge at the door.

They laughed in defiance, a sharp, cruel sound,
Attributing "Connie" to keep me bound.
A nickname used like a thumb on a scale,
To make the "Constantina" seem fragile and frail.

I am the syllables added to spite,
A fortress of letters built up overnight.
Where others were circles, a closed-loop refrain,
I was the "Constantina," the stretch and the strain.

They built me to occupy space they had lost,
A monument raised at a daughter's own cost.
I am the pedestal bearing the weight,
Built out of sorrow and mortared with hate.

I wasn't a choice made of love or of grace,
I was a flag that they planted to take back the space.
Constantina. The name is a fortress and fight,
Born out of shadows and sharpened by spite.

In-between: There was a family tradition for names. "Connie" was supposed to be the name of either the oldest girl of the generation or the oldest girl from the oldest. My father was the oldest of the oldest, so he had his inherited name, and so did my brother. My aunt, however, had the first girl, so she named her "Connie."

My parents were upset, believing the name belonged to me. My parents utilized my proper name as a strategic boundary to reclaim lost territory from my father's sister. Constantina was chosen not out of affection, but as a deliberate weapon of familial spite and one-upmanship. Every time they called me Connie, it was out of spite; the only pride felt was not for the child, but because they had one-upped my father's sister.

Grab Your Ankles

The order came down like weather through the room,
A ritual of dread, a sentence of doom.
We knew what it meant before the hand was raised,
Before the shouting started, and the anger blazed.

The father’s enforcement, a rhythmic, dull thud,
It didn’t seek spirit, it didn’t seek blood.
He struck with a cold and mechanical pace,
An empire of fear in a closed-door space.

The mother grabbed anything closest to hand,
To swing with a wildness she couldn’t command.
She’d break every handle on skin or on wood,
And strike at the target as fast as she could.

The monster built a paddle, a wooden design,
To engineer torment that crossed every line.
He took pride in power, in holes that he made,
In the welt of the crater where James was laid.

The grandmother’s swatter, a mesh of wire-green,
A threat held in waiting, domestic and clean.
She seldom used it, but kept the fear near,
To justify "Needs" when the danger was clear.

Then there was the yeller, a tongue like a whip,
Who let the foul holler and heavy rage slip.
For me, the hand stayed—a silent, strange gap,
I wasn't spared thunder, just spared of the slap.

These forms of a lesson were just a dark guise,
Each hand had a need to look large in its eyes.
Not justice or growth, but a need to command,
To make someone smaller beneath their own hand.

In-between: The house was never a home. It was a controlled environment where each punishment had its own method, texture, and voice. This was not random rage. Each adult had a distinct way of asserting control.

The punishment had its own machinery, but the result was always the same: we learned to anticipate it.

The Prognosis

The surgeon held the image to the light,
A map of fractured bone made plain and white.
The break was visible, the fault severe,
A physical reality made clear.

They spoke in measured words of screws and rods,
Of healing curves and anatomical odds.
They marked the places where the structure failed,
And drew the route by which it could be nailed.

The foot would never quite return the same,
But no one questioned how the injury came.
The X-rays carried proof within the image;
The break existed whether praised or blamed.

Years later, when the weather shifts its tone,
The metal still converses with the bone.
A quiet ache, a structural refrain,
A record of the pressure that remained.

But minds are different.

No image hung against a glowing screen,
To show the places where the force had been.
No surgeon traced the fracture with a pen,
Or gave a date for becoming whole again.

No one could point and say, "The break is here.
This is the wound. This is the damaged year."
The bone was injured, but it was not me;
The mind became the place I seemed to be.

The foot held hardware while the mind held doubt,
The bone healed crooked as the tale spread out.
One carried evidence beneath the skin,
The other hid the fractures deep within.

In-between: People often assume that bone is a metaphor for strength. It isn't. The reason I chose bone is because a broken bone was an injury that came with a diagnosis.

The foot received a diagnosis. The mind received an argument. That distinction became the foundation of the Logic of Bone. Bone records what happened whether anyone witnessed it or not. The foot was injured, but it never became my identity.

The damage described in these pages did not remain so neatly contained. The damage migrated. It entered memory, language, behavior, expectation, and self-concept. The foot carried evidence. I carried the structural alteration.

This book is not about strength. It is about evidence. Bone became the organizing principle because bone possesses something I have never been able to give my own mind: a visible, undeniable record of the injury.

Constantina

At nine, "Constantina" was too loud a sound,
A target for monsters where I couldn't be found.
I folded the syllables, tucked them away,
To hide in "Connie" and not again be the prey.

I made myself small, a ghost in the crowd,
Because "Constantina" was far too loud.
I feared that the unique, the singular sound,
Was a bell for the monster, where I would be found.

If I were a shadow, if I weren't the same,
He couldn't find me through a generic name.
James called me "Sissy," a name of our own,
While everyone else called me "Connie" alone.

So I denied "Constantina," buried the sound,
And hid in the ordinary name they passed around.
For years, I was "Connie," a mask and a lie,
A name for a girl who was waiting to die.

But years later, I no longer would hide
Inside the dull safety of "Connie" inside.
I had spent enough years making myself small,
Enough years believing that smaller meant safe from it all.

Then "Constantina" returned like a blade in my hand,
No longer a warning, no longer a command.
I reclaimed the four beats, the weight of my fate,
A name that was heavier, harder than hate.

I am Constantina. Let him look, let him find,
The girl that he broke has been left behind.
I am the fortress, the lead, and the flame,
I am the woman who owns her own name.

If he comes for this woman, he'll find I am grown,
With a spirit of lead and a logic of bone.
I am Constantina, a flag in plain sight.

In-between: I didn't go back to the full name because I suddenly felt brave. I went back because I simply stopped caring. There is a specific kind of exhaustion where terror finally burns itself out to the ash, leaving nothing behind to bargain with. You stop running when you realize the running takes more energy than the ruin. Do what thou wilt.

The Ceiling Why

The memory comes like a flash in the dark,
A sharp reminder, a singular spark.
I cannot map houses or years or the rooms,
But only the way that a shadow-spot looms.
I anchor my mind to the "how" and the "when,"
To hide from the "where" and the "why" once again.

The world was a torture, a weight, and a blow,
But I found a hook where the shadows could grow.
High on the ceiling, in cottage-cheese white,
A dark little speck was the king of my sight.
I watched it intently with tear-heavy eyes,
Convinced it was breathing in spider-disguise.

I dared not to flinch and I dared not to blink,
Suspended above a bottomless brink.
If I moved a finger or shuttered my gaze,
The creature would drop through the shimmering haze.
It would land on my face with a bite or a sting;
I traded the monster for that living thing.

A single wet tear made a trail to my ear,
The only move allowed by my fear.
If I reached up a hand just to wipe it away,
The spider would fall where my helplessness lay.
So I stayed like a statue, frozen and deep,
While the rest of me drifted in secrets I keep.

I know what occurred in the space on the bed,
But the knowing is different from what’s in my head.
To write what I know would be less than the truth,
For the knowing belongs to a different youth.
The seeing was only that spot on the ceiling,
Where I waited for something to swallow the feeling.

I puzzle over floorplans and curtains and light,
To coax the cold memory back into sight.
But the "where" is a blur and the "why" is the ghost—
The part of the fragment that haunts me the most.
I'll stay in the safety of "how" and of "when,"
And never go back to that "where" once again.

"Why?"

The "Why" is a question for those who are whole,
Not for the girl who is baring her soul.

In-between: My mind spins when I try to analyze the white space surrounding this. I remember some floorplans, furniture, and curtains, but my memory has difficulty focusing on a single room. Initially, I struggled with where I was when this or that happened, and what my surroundings looked like.

I realize now that the blankness is not a failure of recollection — it is the architecture of my own survival. My mind cleared away the geography of the entire world so that a five- to eight-year-old girl could anchor her sanity to a single speck of white ceiling, trading an unbearable monster for a breathing spider.

What I understand now is that this was not passive. The mind of that child made an active concrete decision — redirect, anchor, survive. The spider was not a distraction. It was an engineering solution. The ceiling became the only safe geography in a world where every other surface had been made dangerous.

Redacted Terrain

The map is a shadow that wanders around,
As childhood is traded from town into town.
I knew it was shelter, a vehicle or a home,
An apartment or motel where terror would roam.

The clock is a fracture where sequences break,
Leaving questions of time in a terrifying wake.
But a curtain of roses in permanent bloom,
Fixes the chronology of that trapped room.

The picture is bleached, a pale Polaroid,
A view of the landscape completely destroyed.
The visual details are fading from view,
But the weight in the marrow remains ever true.

The paperwork tracks all the proofs of the case,
The scars are the evidence time can't erase.
Yet the scene is a blackout, a heavy design,
Where the mind has redacted the text from the line.

The archive is quiet, a stone in the chest,
Where the ghosts of the past are invited to rest.
Memory is never a clock on a shelf,
But the blueprint a survivor deployed for herself.

In-between: For years I wanted a complete timeline. I wanted every event in its proper place, every before connected to its after. What finally anchored many memories were not major landmarks, but ordinary objects: a curtain patterned with blue roses, the color of a carpet, the feel of a bench seat. Those details succeeded where chronology failed. The missing pieces were not evidence that nothing happened; they were evidence that my mind intervened. The memory was redacted, not erased. The event disappeared from consciousness, but not from the body.

Cinderella Phenomenon

James was the first, the precarious prize,
With a three-month-old scar and his mother's own eyes.
His pyloric gate was a thickened, shut door,
Rejecting milk, demanding only more.

She'd bartered with surgeons, the cut, and the knife,
To force down the substance that saved his young life.
He was eighteen months of a kingdom-of-one,
Until I arrived like a blot on the sun.

I was the surprise she had tried to erase,
A heartbeat she'd whispered to chemical space.
The failure of every design she'd thought through,
A stubborn, unbidden, and rhythmic thank you.

Seven pounds of a life, perfect and whole,
With a hunger for hands and a reach for a soul.
But she didn't want holding, the mother would lie,
To dress up her coldness in a daughter's small cry.

I was the blame for the heat and the cold,
The scapegoat for every ambition she sold.
If the bottle was empty, if the cupboards were bare,
The fault was the daughter for breathing the air.

She projected the distance, the quiet, the wild,
To justify starving her unwanted child.
I sat behind locks, keeping dark and quiet,
A hunger she wanted to starve with her spiteful diet.

The surgeon had opened the gate for the son,
But for me, the closing had already begun.
No food for the phantom, no glow of the screen,
Just the nothing she needed to keep guilt clean.

But James, at only six, saw the debt I was paying,
And braved the cold halls where the monsters were staying.
He'd smuggle the peanut butter, heavy and sweet,
To feed the problem she'd left to defeat.

He knew what it meant for the stomach to fail,
So he carried the something through the dark and the pale.
I was the accident living in the light of the day,
And James was the only one standing in her way.

In-between: My father used to recount the routine: before work, he would feed me, change me, and leave me in my crib. When he returned at the end of the day, I was exactly where he left me. No one had fed, changed, or even checked on me in the ten hours between. I was a phantom in a full house, an "Error" being erased in real time.

I was told I didn't speak until I was three years old. To the adults in the house, I was a quiet void where a daughter's voice should have been. They eventually discovered that I had been speaking in full, complex sentences all along; I just only spoke to James. We communicated in a shared lexicon of whispers, a private language designed to stay below the radar of the abusers.

Later, my father sent me to my mother's house as punishment. His reasoning was that James had lived there without me and done well. She could handle one child, he believed, so she should be able to handle me.

He did not understand that James's experience there was not proof that the house was safe for me. He had been part of what made it bearable.

The child I trusted most was removed, and the adults called the situation the same.

The Deli Counter

My mother was a child of the boom, a world in her grip,
But the glass of her "calling" was starting to slip.
She chased a career while her beer grew cold,
Trading the hearth for the stories she told.
She said she'd be great, that her star was ascending,
While the gaps in the cupboards were past all defending.

The food stamps were paper, but never for bread,
She traded our meals for a bottle instead.
Thirty cents on the dollar, a drunkard's cruel rate,
To turn all our hunger into beer on her plate.
The milk was a powder, a chalk on the tongue,
A secret we swallowed while we were still young.

"Don't eat," she would warn, with a thin, bitter grace,
"Or a lifetime of dieting is what you will face."
I watched from the shadows, a scavenger's soul,
As she cut at the cheese to make herself whole.
The dried-up remains sat like gold on the plate,
Amidst the debris and the dishes and hate.

I snatched up the rinds, to the room I fled,
To feast on the scraps that the "important" had shed.
I remember the hope that her diet would stay,
So more of the rinds would be coming my way.
For the hunger was constant, a sharp, steady pull,
And only in secret was I ever full.

James found the Diet Aids—sweet, candy-bar lies,
And ate them all, under mother's sleeping eyes.
He was caught with the sweets, a desperate thief,
And the belt was the price for his empty relief.
Then the morning brought locks for the bedroom door—
A hook and an eye, so we'd feed no more.

But James was a phantom, resourceful and lean,
He'd pop out the window and vanish unseen.
Through the front door he'd slide, in the year '76,
With the hunger of God and a bag full of tricks.
He'd climb back inside with a screen and a grin,
Feeding the sister who waited within.

James shared what he had, though it smelled of decay,
The only provider who looked my way.
The rot of his storage was soaking right in,
To the mattress he slept on, a cache for his sin.
He'd laugh a peculiar, dark-tinted sound,
And offer me "cookies" he'd scavenged or found.

A Milk Bone for me, while he'd quietly stash
A hoard in his bed like a criminal's cash.
He was seven years of age with a stomach of lead,
And he called them all cookies, so I could be fed.
He'd steal in the night when the kitchen was bare,
A scavenger king with a bounty to share.

Later, she sits at a counter, a retail employee,
A deli career—the final irony.
The baby-boomer dream at minimum wage,
Still cutting the cheese at her later age.
She handles the food she once taught us to fear,
While she diets and drinks her bottles of beer.

In-between: My mother was always heavyset, even though she was always on some kind of diet. She would tell me, “Let’s hope you grow up pretty, because men don’t like dumb girls.” She was as preoccupied with her appearance as she was with alcohol. When the cupboards were bare and the bedroom door was locked, she had an explanation ready. “I was a baby boomer,” she’d say. “We were pressured to have careers and families. I just can’t do both, so I choose my career.” Last I heard, my mother works at a deli counter of a national variety store.

When James ate, he ate as much as he could. He was slight, and we never understood where all that food went. We used to joke that he had a hollow leg.

Looking back, I see something else in those years. James was learning to solve problems no child should have been given. He found food. He found ways out. He improvised when the adults around us would not or could not. Those same skills later became part of how he protected me, but they were first being trained for survival.

The DNA Denial

The phone was a wire where the poison could run,
A mother's report of the damage I'd done.
She loved the performance, the stage she was in,
A theater of badness where I was the sin.
She threw me at him like a stone or a debt:
"She's your daughter," she snapped, without a regret.

But the voice on the line was a blade in the air,
"We're not too sure about that," was his reply there.
It wasn't about me, or the things I had done,
It was meant to accuse her, and make me the one
Piece of evidence dragged into their fight,
My blood used as a weapon to prove who was right.

She didn't stay silent; she didn't protect,
She carried his words with deliberate effect.
She couldn't take it out on him, so she turned to me,
And made me bear the hurt she could not make him see.
"He says you aren't his," she taunted with pride,
Ensuring I had no one to ever take my side.

In-between: To a child, "I'm not sure she's mine" doesn't mean, "My wife is unfaithful." It means, "I don't want to be your father anymore."

He said he stopped coming to visit because whenever he showed up, she would send us to our room. She said that when he came to visit, it was only to visit her.

The Scapegoat

They said that the house had a limit, a weight,
That James had potential, while mine was my fate.
I could handle the boy, was the drunkard’s refrain,
But the girl is a fever, the girl is a drain.

She hated the mirror, she hated the cost,
And blamed me for every ambition she lost.
I was the reason her life went awry,
A debt she was forced to repay 'til she'd die.

When her bottle ran dry or her temper grew thin,
She’d ship me to Father to let him begin.
But he didn't want daughter, he wanted the peace,
And waited for occasion to sign my release.

I was the too much, the branded, the load,
My life in a sports bag, packed for the road.
There were months in the middle, a silence so sheer,
It swallowed the name and the map and the year.

My safety was never a line on the page,
Just a loose-fitting door on a state-ordered cage.
They’d hand me to strangers and drive out of sight,
With no one to watch for the Hand in the Night.

They didn’t ask Where? and they didn't ask Who?
When the Someone was waiting to break me in two.
I learned that the Guardian is a myth for the weak,
And hope was a language I no longer speak.

In-between: My mother blamed me for everything. She even bragged that the monster only did what he did because I looked like her. Looking at me reminded her of what she had lost. I was blamed for that, too.

At fourteen, I stepped outside the family lie. I left them with their blame and their bottle, and the sidewalk was closer to home than the house had been.

The Human Currency

The phone was a siren through the heart of the squall,
A drunken, slurred summons, a desperate call.
"She’s too much to handle," the mother would lie,
With a bottle in hand and a gleam in her eye.
And just like a shipment, the papers were filed,
To trade off the life of the unwanted child.

For much of my childhood, the map was a blur,
An exchange of souls and a continuous transfer.
The worker’s tan clipboard, a thin plastic shield,
For raw, purple truths that the bruises revealed.
The State counted heads like a tally of grain,
Then sold us back into the blood and the pain.

I studied the hallways, the schools, and the street,
To learn the harsh rhythm of incoming feet.
Scant patterns of temper, grim rations of bread,
And the click of a lock as the shadows were spread.
A student of silence, a master of change,
Where normal was borrowed and safety was strange.

For Mother had math that the State didn't see,
A budget for James and a price tag for me.
The title of daughter or son was outdone,
By the lure of the stamps when the month had begun.
The mailbox was payday, the check was the prize,
While we starved for a look in her drunken eyes.

We were assets to her, but a burden to bear,
A calculation made of thin, poisoned air.
She sent us over lines for a predatory fee,
A blind, binary trade—we were never quite free.
I was worth the paper, the ink, and the green:
The costliest problem the ledger had seen.

They audited bones and they budgeted breath,
A slow-motion trade between living and death.
The stamps have been traded, the mailbox is bare,
And no one is left in that poisonous air.
The accounting is settled, the debt was too steep,
For a childhood the State wasn't careful to keep.

In-between: We moved so often and were traded between caretakers so frequently that the map has become a blur. I can no longer keep the chronology straight; I only remember the transfers.

She would call people up in her drunken stupor, and with slurred words say, we were too much, mostly that I was too much. She would ask people to come get us so the state wouldn't take us.

My father lived a state away and eventually stopped coming. He said there were too many times when she would call him in the middle of the night; he would drive the four hours, and by the time he got there, she would forget even calling him. Also, whether we were at his house or hers, he still had to pay her child support.

Whenever the state removed us, they provided her with a syllabus for our return: a stable residence, a job, counseling sessions, and home inspections. She treated these requirements like a retail performance. She would rent a place and polish the luster of the house just long enough to pass the requirements and reclaim the assets.

Once the check was back in the mailbox and the social worker’s clipboard was closed, the old routine resumed, and another eviction would be incoming. We were never returned to a mother; we were released back into a debt. Meanwhile, she cried and complained about how the system did her wrong and how it was their fault we were taken away. She would try to exchange pity for currency or favors.

My Blue Plaid Dress

They bought a fragile dress for Sunday morning grace,
A blue plaid pattern stitched with ruffles in their place.
The top was white and clean, a stark and binding sign,
A piece of some dark deal to keep my life in line.

The playground dirt was soaked from rain that fell all night,
A muddy ditch had formed between the dark and light.
James had lifted me above the ruined ground,
But when the wheel slowed down, he was not to be found.

An older boy stepped in to fill his empty place,
I jumped alone, unwilling to accept his offered grace.
My boots skidded on the wet and yielding ground,
I fell into the mud as people gathered round.

I scrambled to the bathroom sink to hide my broken state,
And scrubbed the white design to change my sudden fate.
But water only smeared the soil across the space,
And drove the darker stain into the pink-hemmed lace.

Who would want to keep a girl with a muddy dress,
They would only keep the boy and not the mess.
I did not fear the blow or standard punishment,
I feared that I had broken every term of where we went.

I stood inside the stall and watched the mirror's face,
A muddy girl whose pride turned into disgrace.
I was certain I would never see him anymore,
Until a familiar knock broke through the bathroom door.

In-between: This memory introduces the terrifying, invisible stakes that governed our childhood. When you are dependent on the whims of a family member or an institution for a place to sleep, you learn early that your survival is entirely conditional. You are living inside an unwritten contract, and a new dress is not a gift—it is a prop in a deal you never asked to make. In a stable home, a child slipping face-first into the mud is just a simple accident that ends with a bath and a laundry load. For me, it was an absolute catastrophe. Every frantic scrub at the sink was a desperate, losing battle to keep our lives together, because I knew that if the stain won, I would lose my home and be separated from my brother forever.

The Alley Regulars

The alley was the lobby, the car was the crate,
Where we mastered the stifled precision of wait.
In Sunnyside, parked in the shade,
Of the local tavern door where the checks were all paid.

They were "running in" for a minute or two,
To cash in the support and find someone they knew.
While the minutes turned hours in a vinyl-seat cell,
In the back-alley silence of a childhood well.

We built up our kingdoms in dust and in rust,
Two small architects of a fractured trust.
The floorboards were lined with a glass-bottle row,
Where James learned the physics of "nowhere to go."

The rules of the body are harder to keep,
When the bladder is heavy and the alley is deep.
I'd step from the car where the shadows were wide,
To break the rules that kept us locked up inside.

The portal would swing with a heavy, old creak,
To offer the pittance that prisoners seek—
A few crumpled dollars, a bribe for the night,
To walk to the Sunny bakery's light.

A place filled with kindness, with flour and heat,
Where "Regulars" arrived from the dark of the street.
The baker understood what the tavern demands,
And placed the warm sugar in small, waiting hands.

We helped with the chairs as the ovens went cold,
A ritual of labor for children so old.
We stacked up the day as the bakery closed,
While our parents stayed lost where the neon glowed.

The baker called Grandma from two towns away,
To rescue the children from that alleyway.
She took us to safety, a house, and a bed,
Where "Normal" was breathing and children were fed.

But Mother's phone call was jagged and shrill,
Playing a "Worry" she never could feel.
She "couldn't find children," she cried to the air,
To mask the deep shame of the car parked out there.

The ritual shifted, the cargo was lifted,
But not to a place where the shadows had drifted.
No more of the bakery or alleyway roam—
They solved the embarrassment: Locked us at home.

In-between: Most of the time, the adults wouldn't check on us at all. Occasionally, if my mother won something on pull-tabs, she would toss us each a dollar to run to the store and find something to eat. Otherwise, we were treated simply as burdens to bear.

James had an unusual ability to make something out of almost nothing. He could find a route, a person, a solution, a place to sit, a way to get food. He was so creative making stories and games to keep me occupied for hours in the car.

Sibling Scene

Beyond the reach of every hostile hand,
James and I possessed our own private land.
We built a sovereign space they could not see,
A quiet kingdom where our minds were free.

We spoke a dialect they could not trace,
A private language in a crowded space.
With hidden codes and custom shifts of tone,
We claimed a language that was ours alone.

We invented games and conjured stories,
To pass the heavy hours and claim our glories.
Locked in separate rooms or trapped in the back seat,
We found a brilliant way to avoid defeat.

We merged two games upon a hidden grid,
Where tic-tac-toe and Battleship were hid.
We mapped the coordinates across the space,
And whispered secrets through the wall's thin face.

We still would argue in the quiet dark,
And hiss accusations through the plaster mark.
I'd claim he cheated on his hidden line,
Defending every square I claimed as mine.

They locked the doors to keep our lives apart,
But could not check the tether of the heart.
The world we built was our escape clause,
A secret fortress where we built our own laws.

In-between: When they locked us in separate rooms or left us waiting in a parked car, the goal was containment. They wanted isolation to do their work for them. What they didn't understand was that James and I had already built something they couldn't touch. Our private language, our grid games whispered through the plaster—these weren't just ways to pass the time. They were resistance.

We were still children. Not survivors performing resilience—just two kids who argued over whether someone cheated on a grid drawn through a wall. The whisper games were serious business. Winning mattered. That was the point—not just to share our time, but to share a childhood. They contained us but never controlled us. Winning our whisper games was a win for the day.

Years later, as adults during a disagreement, I believed he lied to me and told him so. He looked at me and replied: "Yes, I lied, it was the only way I could win"—instantly ending the entire disagreement as we both broke out in laughter.

The Knowledgeable

The school assigned a strict, nocturnal loan,
A bound archive that James could claim alone.
He brought a single volume home each night,
To yield it back before the morning light.

While I was kept from desk and formal class,
I watched the heavy days of autumn pass.
I could not decipher lines upon the page,
Exiled from literacy at an early age.

He taught me every letter, syllable, and sound,
Until the marks upon the page were found.
The words that once were locked and out of reach
Began to yield beneath the things he'd teach.

But twilight claimed him as the sun went west,
And sleep grew heavy on his small-boy chest.
The books were due each morning with the dawn,
Yet half the borrowed knowledge lingered on.

James studied the problem and formed a plan:
No single reader could outrun the span.
If learning happened while a body slept,
Then none of what was borrowed would be left.

I read aloud while James drifted away,
And carried the story through the dark till day.
My voice moved forward while he lay in bed,
The words still gathering somewhere in his head.

We mapped a quiet plan through the night,
Trading our vigils by the lantern light.
He taught me how to read so we could learn,
A simple truth that we alone could earn.

In-between: James won a bookmark contest at the school I was not allowed to attend. The phrase he painted on that small strip of paper was simple: learn to read to read to learn.

James discovered encyclopedias at school, but they could only be borrowed overnight. He wanted all of the information inside those books, but there was a problem. He was a child, and children get tired. If he couldn't stay awake long enough to read an entire volume, perhaps I could continue reading after he fell asleep. He became convinced that the information would still reach him somehow.

First, he had to teach me to read. He taught me every letter, syllable, and sound until the marks on the page stopped looking like symbols and started becoming words. Then, each night, I would continue reading after he drifted off to sleep—or at least I tried.

Whether his theory worked or not is almost beside the point. James believed knowledge was too important to surrender to exhaustion. He approached learning the same way he approached every other obstacle in our childhood: as a problem to solve.

James taught me to read because he wanted access to a bigger library than one child could carry alone. I learned to read to read to learn.

Across the Street

The news had come down like a gavel, a blow:
That James was the one who was allowed to go.
To live at my dad’s, to be safe and be free,
While the door to the "Possible" was bolted for me.
I didn't run out to leave the home behind;
I ran so that James would have something to find.

I thought if I vanished, the math would be flawed,
A crack in the plan that the adults had clawed.
If I was the "Missing," the "Lost," and the "Gone,"
They couldn't just leave me and move the day on.
I ran to the bushes, a trap for the day,
To force them to look for the one gone astray.

The sun touched the dirt and the moon took the sky,
As I waited for someone to notice the lie.
A full turn of hours, a night in the cold,
While the story of "Missing" refused to be told.
No calling my name through the dark or the light,
Just the house standing still in the middle of night.

By the time the car rounded the bend,
I was part of the grit, the dirt, and the end.
I watched from the leaves as he stepped to the mat,
Ignoring the shadow where his sister sat.
James carried his bag and his dreams of the game,
While no one in the doorway mentioned my name.

The engine turned over, a mechanical roar,
As the "Statue" stayed hidden on the forest floor.
I watched the tail-lights grow distant and thin,
Realizing the cage was the brush I was in.
I didn't move out from the needles and pine;
I stayed in the shadows to finish the line.

I stayed in the dirt as the engine went still,
Hoping for ghosts or a change in the will.
If I stayed in the "Missing," if I stayed out of sight,
Maybe she'd think I had shared in the flight.
I hoped she would think that my dad took the weight,
And closed up the book and locked up the gate.

But the front door clicked shut and the evening arrived,
And the house went on breathing as if I'd survived.
I walked through the threshold, a ghost in the hall,
Waiting for someone to notice my fall.
I stood in the kitchen, a shape in their view,
But I was a ghost that they already knew.

Everything that mattered had driven away,
In a car full of hope on a Saturday grey.
With James in the seat, they had taken my light;
Without him to find me, I vanished from sight.
I wasn't a girl with a heart or a head;
I was the "Silence" living as the dead.

In-between: As we got older, the separations became longer and more frequent. My father would take James for months at a time, leaving me behind. During those months, I was the only child in the house until she started finding friends to take me in.

When I hid in the bushes that night, I was testing whether I existed at all without my brother there to "find" me. I stayed out in the cold until the weekend, waiting for a search that never happened. No one called for me.

When I eventually walked back inside, nothing had changed. I realized then that my father had a place for James, but not for me, and my mother only "reclaimed" my brother when she sobered up or needed to settle her own accounts.

The Inversion

The monster played at kindness, a predatory art,
Using a lie of love like a shield for his heart.
He gave me the gifts and the shiny, new shoes,
A currency spent until violence was his ruse.

His care was a cage made of velvet and bone,
Where the rules of the prison were clearly made known.
His mask was a secret, a smile made of blood,
To bury the prize in a guilty driven flood.

But Mother was hate in a normal disguise,
With a venomous truth in her performative eyes.
Her mask was a martyr, a frown made of wine,
To poison the spirit and tangle the spine.

They traded in secrets, they brokered the air,
To keep the truth buried and leave the soul bare.
He needed the quiet to cover his crime,
She needed the stillness to shatter my mind.

She didn't want gifts or the pretty or grace,
She wanted my silence to cover her space.
His lie of love was the hook that pulled at my skin,
But her hate was the fire that burned from within.

He used the guise to keep me in reach,
A bridge that he built for the spiritual breach.
But she used the hate to push me away,
While claiming the grief of the damage each day.

The monster was predictable—the barb and the hook,
But my Mother was the madness, evil mistook.

In-between: As a child, I learned that love was a hook and hate was a fire, leaving me to become my own predator in a world where my primary guardians were the designers of the spiritual breach. He brokered the body while she brokered the air.

Reason 2: The Happiness Tax

"It didn't start with terror or a cry, / but with the lotion and a quiet lie."

Safety had a price. Kindness was a ledger entry, not a gift. What the monster gave, he collected — with interest, on his schedule, in his currency. This is the accounting of what it cost to survive him.

The child is five years old at the opening of this record. She is nine by its close.

The entries that follow document the anatomy of assault directly. They do not soften the record. Reader discretion is advised.

Bare Feet

When I was five, a different shadow came
To claim our house and change my mother's name.
He stepped inside before the vows were tied,
With secrets that he kept tucked deep inside.

A monster picks a soul by what is near,
And feeds upon a child's unspoken fear.
If access to the heart is wide and free,
The predator arrives with certainty.

My mother traded me to buy her peace,
Giving the beast a long and lawless lease.
She didn't care if I was bruised or broken,
As long as not a single word was spoken.

But when she went a few towns far away,
He opened up the door and let me play.
The world was grand, the house was wide and bright—
A sudden end to lonely day and night.

He gave me clothes and shiny, heavy shoes,
The kind of "gifts" a child can't refuse.
They looked so right upon my small, bare feet,
But every step was sharp and far from sweet.

It was a window, brief and strange and wide,
Where I was allowed to step back out... inside.
But every meal and every hour of TV I would see,
Was just the debt he'd later take from me.

In-between: There was an ice cream shop with treats coated in a hard orange shell. The monster would tell me we were going there, then stop on the side of the road on the way. Sometimes we came home never having gotten the treat.

The Fitting Room

Behind the glass where the silk was spun,
The shadows of a secret had just begun.
His grandmother's shop—a world of lace,
A velvet trap, an unsafe place.

At five years old, I was the frame
For dresses that were yet to be claimed.
He smoothed the lotion on my skin,
To mask the scent of coming sin.

It smelled of roses, thick and sweet,
From my small shoulders to my feet.
A floral shroud to hide the hand
That moved across the forbidden land.

"A secret," he'd whisper, low and thin,
While sliding the fabric over my chin.
I thought the "shame" was the stolen thread,
Not the monster's hands or the things he said.

I was a mannequin, still and cold,
Doing exactly what I was told.
He dressed the "toy" in the back-room light,
And taught me to hide in the middle of sight.

He measured the waist and he measured the limb,
Till the world outside grew distant and dim.
A fitting for beauty, a fitting for grace,
While he stole the person—and left me in her place.

In-between: I didn't go to school like my brother, so I spent my days with him at the dress shop. I always thought the reason we couldn't talk about what he did was because the dresses were being sold. I believed no one would want to buy them if they knew he had put them on me. I thought I was protecting the shop, not realizing I was the one being stolen.

Rabbit Witness

I am the velveteen shadow, stitched and mute,
My final seam is anchored to the root.
The only heart that can never truly break,
And the promises a child chose not to take.
I am the vessel, stuffed with simple grace,
The witness carved of cotton, dust, and space.

The room went dark, the way it always does;
I was tucked close beneath the pillow's fuzz.
My purpose is the comfort found inside
My soft brown velvet, only meant to hide.
I am a listener of simple things,
The quiet songs that only dreaming sings.

But then the floorboards gave their heavy sound,
The heavy tread of violence on the ground.
The breathing in the darkness, guttural, low,
A smell of sour where the shadows grow.
My small legs tried to squeeze the fear away,
But I am only cotton, dust, and fray.

The world became a sudden, violent shock,
A rapid, awful shaking of the rock.
My seams stretched tight, I felt the child's soft fear,
The sudden, frantic clutching and the tear.
The sounds were muffled, wet and sharp and deep,
While I was squeezed in silence, made to weep.

My left eye popped, my cotton skin was torn;
A sticky stain clung on my foot, forlorn.
I know the ending is not my release:
To hold her silence is my only peace.
We will be sealed inside this shattered cell,
A broken comfort waiting for the knell.

Then silence came, a different, awful thing,
The quiet after glass had ceased its ring.
I felt the sudden wetness of the tears,
The little bones that rested, full of fears.
The child's small breath was shallow, pulled and thin,
A place where something void had settled in.

I finally felt the truth the fire brought,
The ugly price that love has always cost.
I understood the 'Real' I always sought,
The silent wound of all that would be lost.
I yearned for glue to fix the velvet pain,
To be the cheap, unfeeling toy again.

In-between: When things are very painful or confusing, it can be easier for me to remember them as a Witness instead of being stuck in the aftermath.

I don't want the events to be real, but mostly, I don't want to be real. The witness lets me see myself on that bed while also becoming the detached observer watching what was happening to me. I forced my conscious self to drift into the velvet so I could survive the room, while my internal Witness stayed behind in the dark to keep the score.

The Happiness Tax

It didn't start with terror or a cry,
But with the lotion and a quiet lie.
A slow progression, gentle and discrete,
The smell of roses making life feel sweet.
I didn't know the "Right" from what was "Wrong,"
I only knew the peace was never long.

The pleading voice began to change its tone,
Until I felt a chill within my bone.
"Just touch it," he would whisper, soft and thin,
The invitation to a deeper sin.
But when my touch was not the way he planned,
The monster reached and grabbed my small, weak hand.

The "Little Lady" with the hurting grip,
Saw the mask of the monster start to slip.
The pressure on my fingers, tight and hard,
Left the spirit bruised and deeply scarred.
And when the mess was made upon the sheet,
He used the shame to make the theft complete.

"Go wash your face," he'd say with steady stare,
As if the filth of it was never there.
A glass of water and the TV screen,
To scrub the memory of what had been.
The cure for crying was a slap or pinch,
Until I learned to never give an inch.

I paid the tax to keep the monster still,
To satisfy the hunger of his will.
If he was proud, the world was bright and wide,
But if he frowned, there was nowhere left to hide.
The consequence was a heavy, silent weight
A child's life decided by his mental state.

In-between: It is difficult to reconcile with the fact that, as evil as the monster was, many times when he was happy or pleased, everyone did better. After being told so many times how sorry he was, one would think I would have stopped believing him. I didn't.

I didn't see it as transactional at that age, but that is essentially how I described it years later. The peace could be enormous: food, attention, release from my room, and being allowed to play.

The Helper

They thought it was funny, a six-year-old drunk,
A child made a spectacle, stumbling and sunk.
The mother was laughing; the “Parents” looked on,
While innocence slipped and the boundaries were gone.

He lay beside me, appearing to care that night,
The one who pretended to be making things right.
He claimed the sick child and called me his own,
Then used my helplessness once we were alone.

The bathroom was daunting, steam in the air,
The stripping was usual, exposed and bare.
My underwear hit the warm water like lead,
A sudden dark warning of things left unsaid.

I cried for the water, I cried through the blur,
Knowing the reason, how could I endure?
He climbed in behind me, a weight in the tub,
The water was rising, the room seemed to throb.

He rocked me like rhythm, his hands on my skin,
The friction of contact, the actions of sin.
I fought for the statue, I reached for the stone,
But the poison had liquified muscle and bone.

I couldn't stay still as the terror shook instead,
If I moved, I was certain he’d leave me for dead.
He washed away the sickness, then left without a trace,
The monster disappearing behind the helper’s face.

In-between: What purpose would anyone have to get a six-year-old drunk? Or James at seven?

The helper was not a separate person from the threat. The same person could create the helplessness and then position himself as the one who would care for the helpless child.

The Choking

The lessons shifted from the soft to the hard,
Until the spirit was broken and barred.
He pulled my hair and he pressed his weight,
Negotiating the terms of six year old fate.

When the air wouldn't come and the panic would rise,
He looked at the terror within my eyes.
"Choking," he whispered—a sound I still fight—
"Choking. Until you do it right."

He spoke of the teeth and the curve of the lip,
While I felt the world and my sanity slip.
It wasn't defiance that kept my mouth closed,
But the fear of the monster the darkness exposed.

His hand came from nowhere—a strike to the face
That sent me to cower in my own private space.
Then he offered me prizes, a bribe for the show,
To bury the things that he didn't want known.

The threats were the fences he built for the cage,
A weapon he used at a terrifying age.
He'd hurt my mother, my brother, and me,
If I ever attempted to truly be free.

I learned the vibration, the heat of his skin;
I knew when the violence was about to begin.
I tried to pull back, but he held me too tight,
Extinguishing every last flicker of light.

My home became a cathedral of dread,
With the glass of the water and crust of the bread.
The door was a hinge he'd learned to neglect,
To silence the body he sought to defect.

The taste of the secret would linger for hours,
Defying the water and the soap's fading powers.
I learned to do everything just as he planned,
To trade my own soul for a stay of his hand.

In-between: The glass of water was the primary siren. In therapy, I focused on it because it was a tangible, singular trigger I could point to. I didn't realize until months into EMDR that the water was the before and the after. It was the solid image I stared at while the choking was the action.

The glass was a trigger because it represented the stillness of the room while my world was being dismantled. It was the standard object in a non-standard nightmare. Now, I see the water for what it was: a fixed point my mind used to anchor itself so I didn't completely float away while he was choking me.

Tacoma Hospital

The monster was sidelined, a hospital bed,
While we found an apartment, a roof overhead.
Tacoma was grey and the Mother was gone,
Leaving James and the girl to wait for the dawn.
We played on the stairs until midnight was past,
A stunt-kind of freedom that couldn't quite last.

The neighbors had whispered, the accusations grew,
the closet became the only room I knew.
Then came the dark, the water-heater hiss,
A small, scorching dark—is this "safety," or this?
James was the guard, the savior on again,
Sliding food where the light would bend.

I prayed for the monster to walk through the door,
To take me away from that hard, dirty floor.
He came home at last and the closet was done,
I thought for a moment the battle was won.
With James in the room and the furniture bare,
I sat in the dark in my own folding chair.

We kept our belongings in cardboard and box,
A life without anchors, a life without locks.
No furniture stood in that shared vacant space,
But I thought I saw "Home" in the monster's grim face.
He didn't want closets; he ended the night,
And for one fleeting second, the future felt light.

But the "rescue" was poison; the "out" was a lie,
As the sun took its place in the Tacoma sky.
He sold Fuller Brushes and vacuums by hand,
With a girl in the seat to help "sell" the brand.
A storage pad sat on the top of the car,
While we traveled the roads that were lonely and far.

He said that he needed me, help with the trade,
A "Little Girl" mask for the plans he had made.
It didn't take long for the torture to start,
To dismantle the hope he had placed in my heart.
For the side of the road was the designated spot,
Where he took what he wanted and left me to rot.

In-between: While he was sidelined in the Tacoma hospital, we lived in an apartment that felt like a vacant lot. We were outside playing after midnight, so a neighbor complained. As a result, my mother kept me in the closet, a "Problem" tucked away behind the water-heater hiss. Nights when she went out turned into weekends, even when she was home. James would slide food through the crack in the door—the only "Scavenger" logic that kept me alive.

When the monster finally returned and took me out of that closet, I mistook his presence for a rescue. But the "out" was a lie. He immediately put me to work. I became the "Little Girl" in the passenger seat, a prop to help him sell Fuller Brushes and vacuums. He used my face to open doors, then took me to the side of the road.

He even updated his arsenal. He showed us dry ice one day, explaining with clinical precision exactly what it would do to our skin. Even when we weren't being choked, the threats had changed form.

The Traveling Show

The mask was shed to show the beast within,
A sadist trading virtue for a sin.
He sought a target, small and far too near,
To feed his hunger and to plant his fear.

To him, I was the prize he meant to take,
While James was just a wall he had to break.
He turned his violence to my brother's frame,
Because I was the reason and the blame.

The carnival show, a neon, moving blur,
A rootless life, a hell to endure.
From trucks to cars, we lived upon the road,
While Mother watched him carry out his code.

"Your fault," he'd hiss, as James would take the fall,
For every "crime," no matter how small.
He punished James to keep me in my place,
A calculated invisible slap across my face.

But James's eyes, through every bruise and tear,
Refused to hold the blame or feed the fear.
He stood between the monster and my soul,
Surviving was our only common goal.

In-between: We were part of a traveling carnival, living in trucks and cars, a transient existence where the "Standard" world couldn't reach us.

The monster started punishing James for everything I did. He would hiss, "This is your fault," as he turned his violence on my brother. He told my brother that he was responsible for me.

One evening, I saw James being thrown past me like he was a sack of potatoes. It is a slow-motion memory: him flying through the air, his eye staring straight at me—not looking where he was going or at the wall he was about to hit, but at me. I never felt like James blamed me.

Carnival Floorboard

The house was gone; the walls were steel and glass,
Watching the world and the highway miles pass.
James and Mother in the back—a heavy, silent weight,
While I slept on the floorboard, resigning to my fate.

The passenger side was my world and my bed,
With the boots of the monster right over my head.
We stayed in motels for a shower and a thief's take,
Stealing the sheets for the ground where we'd wake.

He worked for the carnival, a world of bright lies,
Where the monster hid well in a carnie's disguise.
When he worked, we ran free through the light,
But the "free" was a loan he reclaimed every night.

Most fear the midnight, the creep of the floor,
But I feared the noon and the open car door.
For the sun was a witness, a high, blinding eye,
With no cover of darkness, no star in the sky.

One day in the shadows, another man saw
The breach of the skin and the break of the law.
The carnie just watched as the monster stood tall
And claimed I was "his"—no mercy at all.

He pushed on my head, a command to obey,
While the carnival turned in its mechanical way.
He hurt me in sunshine, in the heat and the glare,
While the world was awake and the sounds filled the air.

The mind was a blank, but the bone kept the score
Of the incidents gathered on that vehicle floor.
No words for the child, just a mark on the brain,
As the daylight bore witness to the pain.

In-between: I remember the incidents with a clarity that feels forensic, yet I was entirely absent from my own mind. I was six years old, living on the floorboard of a car, directly beneath the boots of the man who was breaking me.

I don't understand why my recall is so full when the child was so far away. It was as if my brain was recording data it couldn't yet process—the heat of the sun, the sounds of the carnival nearby, the pressure of his hand. I was a child who had been reduced to a physical space on a vehicle floor. I lived in the blinding noon, where the daylight bore witness to things the world usually saves for the dark.

"Question?"

He called from the tile, the porcelain white,
The end of the hall, where I dreaded the sight.
I started the march, each step coming slow,
Towards the place I didn’t want to go.
The voice came again, and the tone had changed,
What once sounded gentle now sounded estranged.

I stood by the doorway, knowing why he called,
That was why I hesitated, why I stalled.
Then came the tug of his hand on my arm,
The doorway gave way as I froze in alarm.
The hinge swung open, and I could not retreat,
While the tile floor slid beneath my bare feet.

The water was rushing, a roar of my doom,
But my focus stayed fixed on the face in the room.
He reached for the tub and he silenced the flow,
Then threw in the towel, all for show.
I didn't understand why the fabric was drowned,
As he forced me to kneel on the cold, sterile ground.

I bit without meaning to, a reflex of fear,
As the walls of the bathroom began to draw near.
The rack hit my back as he threw me away,
A heap on the floor where the helplessness lay.
But the mercy was brief, a flicker of lead,
As he lifted the statue and forced it ahead.

He moved past my skin with a clinical hate,
While the theft of my breathing decided my fate.
My eyes felt the pressure, the popping of light,
The sleep starting deep as I lost the last fight.
A gag and a heave, the throat closing tight,
As he stifled the scream and extinguished the light.

With the weight of his flesh filling up all the space,
There was no room for air, there was no room for grace.
Then the shove of the finger, invasive and fast,
Breaking through the places I'd guarded the last.
A cold, sudden pain, piercing and thin,
Shot up through my spine from under the skin.

"Is this what you want?" he demanded to know,
As though I had asked him to hurt me so.
He demanded an answer I could never speak,
Seven years of a spirit made fragile and weak.
I could not answer, however he pressed,
With his hand on my neck and his weight on my chest.

Why would he ask it? To poison the well,
To make me the author of my own private hell.
He anchored the agony deep in the mind,
To tether the Question? to a breath I couldn't find.
Then the bath for the dirty, the scrub for the shame,
Followed by pretty, the end of the game.

The dirty was his, and the want was a lie,
A performative mask for a predator's eye.
I sat in the water, a vessel of doubt,
Still wondering what the Question? was about.

In-between: During that time, I stopped eating and drinking. I tried to solve the pain with body logic. If I didn't put anything in, I thought, nothing would have to come out. I was trying to shut down my own biological systems to avoid the pain of using the bathroom. I didn't understand why it didn't work, or that the body continues to produce waste even when it is starving.

I was also confused by how I could be both dirty and cherished within the same hour.

The Hair

The Hair: The Fall

No one was home so we went out to play,
We snuck to the lot in the heat of the day.
I climbed on the semi, just being a kid,
Not thinking at all of the things we did.

I watched as the gravel came up for my face,
A normal mistake in a wide-open space.
I thought I fell forward, but hit on the back,
A simple slip-up on a rusty old track.

James grabbed a towel to stop up the red,
The river that poured from the back of my head.
The fall wasn't bad and the fall wasn't wrong,
Just a childhood moment that didn't belong.

We reached for the glue and the Vaseline jar,
To seal up the hole and to hide the deep scar.
We weren't afraid of the wound or the pain,
Just the fact that our secret was now down the drain.

I sat on the floor by the monster's own chair,
Back to his knees in the flickering glare.
He saw the blood matted deep in the gold,
The only part of the story that had to be told.

The ice from the bucket was wrapped in a sheet,
To stop all the bleeding and make it look neat.
They talked for a minute of what they would say,
Then took me to get all the gravel cleared away.

The car was a silence, a stagnant, dark air,
Mother and James stayed waiting right there.
The monster led me through the hospital door,
To handle the business and settle the score.

The razor was buzzing a metal-cold song,
They stitched up the skin where the silence was long.
I sat like a statue, alone in my doubt,
Afraid that my brains would soon tumble out.

In-between: This was one of the few times I remember going to a doctor for an injury. I was far more afraid of getting into trouble than I was of the actual damage to my head. The adults all acted as if it were incredibly severe, which only made me worry more—not because I thought the injury would kill me, but because I was terrified that the monster would "lose control" again.

I kept looking at him while the doctor was putting in the stitches, knowing not to cry because the monster didn't stop looking into my eyes, while the other adults kept telling me how strong and brave I was.

The Hair: The Question of "When?"

I ask of the silence, I ask of the past,
Why did I know how to make the seams last?
The glue and the jelly, the kit on the shelf,
The tools that I used to try fixing myself.

How did a child know the trick of the trade,
To seal up the wounds that the violence had made?
Unless those same tools had been used on my skin,
Long before gravel had ever moved in.

The fall was a story, contained and controlled,
A wound with a date that could simply be told.
But the kit in my hands had a different account,
A memory my mind could not yet surmount.

If the story was already etched in the skin,
Then the night on the bed was not where it began.
It was only the moment the ceiling came down,
On a foundation breaking away from the ground.
The when is a ghost that I can't quite outrun,
Proving that the before had already surely begun.

In-between: The system loves a singular timeline because an accident can be filed away and closed. For years, the narrative of my childhood survival was anchored to the memory of the catastrophic "Fall."

But when I found myself holding the super glue and Vaseline, his wound-care kit, my seven-year-old fingers did not hesitate. I already knew what to do.

The Hair: The Statue

I lay on my side with the ice on the wound,
To the rhythm of breathing and silence attuned.
I couldn't stay hidden and I couldn't run,
For the night and the watching had only begun.

The monster was heavy, a weight on the bed,
The pillow was frozen beneath my own head.
I didn't dare sleep or to drift in the dark,
For fear of the hand and the predatory mark.

Then James hit the door with a soft, creaking sound,
Looking for me while the silence was profound.
I felt the bed shift as the monster took aim,
A roar in the quiet at the sound of a name.

I felt him move upward, away from my side,
To go for the boy who had no place to hide.
But he stayed in the sheets and he leveled a yell,
While I lay in the heat of my personal hell.

The following night he saw I was fine,
The stitches were holding and crossing the line.
He figured by now that I must be alright,
So he stayed in my bed in the absence of light.

He moved past the fingers, he moved past the skin,
The first time more than his digits entered within.
No longer just hands or the pinch of a dread,
As he forced his way into the life that I led.

I lay like a statue, a vessel of doubt,
Still afraid that my brains were about to fall out.
The fall was a trifle, a scrape on a stone,
Compared to the terror of being alone.

In-between: I had always thought that this specific night was when things started to change from bad to worse, moving from the bearable to the absolute unbearable. For years, I believed that because of my head injury, he was forced to progress and find a different way to make me meet his needs.

This was the last time he went with me to the doctor. He always seemed to have whatever medicine he needed me to use.

I had pneumonia once from sleeping on a mat in a closet behind the bathroom shower. There was a leak behind the shower, pouring water directly onto my "bed." It was a hotel or motel.

The monster didn't go with us to the doctor; he went out of town in the only car, leaving us to take a ride with a stranger. Now, I believe it was partly because he wasn't sure of his total control as I got older.

The Three Paths

The night was a tunnel, narrow and deep,
Where promises made were the ones he'd not keep.
At seven years old, I was seasoned and still,
Awaiting the turn of his mercurial will.

I stayed like a mannequin, frozen and chill,
On the edge of the bed where the air was too still.
I listened for footsteps, the creak of the wood,
To tell me the ending as best as I could.

Three different men could return through that frame,
To play out the cycles of his sick private game.
He'd come with the towel to scrub out the sin
A check of skin where the pain had been.

Or he'd fall on the bed with a pathetic cry,
And beg for forgiveness for the "sweet" little lie.
"I can't help myself," he would whisper and weep
While I carried the secrets he was too weak to keep

The "Crying Rule" meant that my eyes must stay dry,
While the predator sobbed a performative lie.
He'd cast himself victim, the thief of the grief,
While I sat in the silence without a relief.

But the third man was darker, a sadist in bloom,
Who brought the cold steel to the edge of the room.
He watched for the flinch as the metal would bite,
In the clinical glow of the child's night light.

In the morning, the towel and the monster had fled,
Leaving me in the silence of my unwelcome bed.
The glass of water remained there with its bubbles of air,
A stale, silver witness of the night's dark despair.

In-between: I never understood the "Why." I watched him make his marks and then stare directly into my eyes, waiting for a flinch, a scream, or a tear. Was he trying to make me ugly to punish me? Or was he trying to punish the part of himself he saw in my reflection?

I stayed frozen, a mannequin on the bed. I didn't understand what he wanted from the marks. I only knew that I had learned to read the signs before the door opened: the weight of the footstep, the rhythm of the breathing, the specific quality of the silence preceding entry.

A seven-year-old should not possess that instrument.

The Drive-In Stall

The monster took me everywhere, a shadow on a chain,
Through the heat of the swap meet and the quiet pain.
I never left his sight, not for a second, not for one,
A planet held in orbit by a cold and dying sun.
He stood among the junk, the peddler and his prize,
While he traded in the sunlight with those dark and heavy eyes.

A marketplace of strangers, a business of the day,
But I was just another thing he refused to put away.
Lunch in the Travelall, the windows taped and blind,
Leaving the world of people and the light of day behind.
No lotion of rose, no water—just the locking of the door,
The ritual was broken; he didn't need the signal anymore.

Then a knock upon the glass, a customer who wouldn't wait,
A hand against the metal, a rattling of my fate.
She saw the darkness in the car and the child hidden there,
She felt the shifting secret in the heavy, summer air.
She confronted the monster, she screamed into the light,
A sudden scene in middle of the public sight.

"Call the police!" she cried, her voice a sudden bell,
Trying to pull a witness from the middle of a hell.
She reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling toward the world,
While the banners of my safety were tattered and unfurled.
She braced for the reaction, body stiff against the sun,
But the monster didn’t move, he knew the war was won.

He didn’t shout or strike; he didn’t react at all,
Just watched me as he loaded things from the swap-meet stall.
His eyes were flat and heavy, dark and piercing through the air,
A cold and silent gravity that held me tightly there.
I shook her grip and pulled away, I broke the stranger’s hold,
I hurried to the shadow, I hid behind the monster.

I hate the child who ran to him, who sought a bitter grace,
And found a jagged shelter in that dark and crowded space.
I am ashamed of the girl that hurried back to hide,
Choosing the terror of the monster over the world outside.
We scrambled for the car, leaving half the wares behind,
Leaving the crowd, the building, the chaos and the kind.

Out through the one-way exit, the tires screaming loud,
Escaping from the justice of a growing, angry crowd.
"I'm going for bread," he said, to end that day,
He dropped me at the curb and then he sped away.
I never "really" saw him again—not the monster in the seat,
But I saw his face in every crowd and his car on every street.

In-between: Over the years, we forget people's faces but tend to remember what they looked like. The lady from the swap meet is etched in my mind, as is the disappointment on her face when I ran from her.

I wanted to tell her why, to tell her that I was not who I appeared to be, but I cannot. I don't know who she was, and at the time, I didn't know who I was. Even as I blamed myself, I worried more about what would happen when we returned to the house.

The drive home was terrifying. My mind was screaming, but the world was completely silent. I wondered whether dropping me off and leaving was my punishment or my salvation. I wondered when he would return.

What I understand now is that I had no experience with safety offered without a cost. The woman's reaching mattered, even though I ran.

Aging Out

Under the heat of the Arizona sun,
The monster decided that his work was done.
"I'm going for bread," was the lie that he said,
Then vanished like smoke from the lives that we led.

He left like a coward, a thief in the night,
But Mother refused to see truth in the light.
She didn't see predatory rot or the shame,
She only saw me as the one who's to blame.

We boarded a bus for the Evergreen State,
To Grandmother's house and a different fate.
But even as mountains and forests flew by,
I carried the weight of her favorite lie.

"You've gotten too old," was the venom she spat,
As if my own growth was a sin or a trap.
Because I was aging, her "soulmate" walked away,
And I was the price that she was willing to pay.

From the very first day to the bitterest end,
A mother who never once chose to defend.
If she's breathing today, she is whispering still:
That I was the cause of the monster's will.

In-between: I always wondered how much my age had to do with him leaving, but not in the way she meant it. He had become more violent and empowered. I wondered if he started to realize the less control he actually held as I got older.

She was operating under two conflicting stories. If what he did was because of me specifically, then my getting older should not have mattered. If my age is why it ended, then it was never about me.

Unheard Of

After the monster, the doctors took their turn,
To trace the scars they were paid to learn.
The house shifted into a new kind of strange,
As every room and hallway went through a change.

She filled the house with performative rage,
Rattling the bars of a public stage.
She guessed and made assumptions of my reality,
While no one dared to ask what happened to me.

She cried for neighbors, collecting all their pity,
Peddling her grief to the whole damn city.
They listened to everything she chose to say,
But no one asked what I had endured along the way.

She claimed the weight of “hurt” as her property,
A black-veined stone for her own tragedy.
She carried my damage as proof of her pain,
And excluded me from my own story again.

I became the file, the broken, the lost,
A bloodless debt with no one to count the cost.
The facts were recorded; my voice was not,
And no one questioned the story they'd got.

When the porch light died and the audience was gone,
She dropped the mask and the belt came on.
She twisted the story until roles reversed,
Then gave them her version of what I had done.

She whispered vile things no neighbor ever heard,
While others built meaning from every word.
She swore I'd sought the shadow to tarnish her name,
And no one asked me if her story was the same.

I had no control of the story or pen,
Lost in the where and lost in the when.
They listened to her; they listened to them,
While I was left out of the story again.

They had their records, and her word,
But still I remained unheard.

In-between: My mother would have done nothing (no reports, no doctors, no intervention) if my grandmother hadn't forced the issue. It was my grandmother who insisted on the medical and therapeutic evaluations.

My mother told everyone what happened to me, or her version of it. The worst part was that I could always tell when she had told a story, because people treated me differently. They looked at me differently, and they avoided me entirely.

My grandmother offered her own cure, the church. She believed that saving my soul could stand in for acknowledging the harm to my body. At least my grandmother tried to do something.

The Standard Reply

The room was a silence, a sterile, white cold,
Where secrets are kept and the truths are untold.
The nurse was a kindness, a soft-spoken grace,
Who stayed by my side in that bright, stark space.

She helped me to change in a gown made of flowers,
To hide what was broken through clinical hours.
"How is school?" was the question she casually brought,
To cover the monster that nobody fought.

Mother said I was "dumb," so what could school do?
School was a door I was never led through.
She branded my future as broken and blind,
So "Fine" was the word that I left them to find.

I don't recall hands or the face of the man,
Who charted the damage as best as one can.
He asked if it hurt, if the body was sore,
I whispered a "No" as I looked at the door.

For Mother was screaming out there in the hall,
"Will she be normal?" rang over it all.
No doctor or counselor asked what occurred,
They left me in silence, not asking a word.

The scars are the maps that I still wear,
Of the questions no one would dare.
I hid in the shadows, a soul on a shelf,
And "Fine" was the brave lie I used to save myself.

In-between: My grandmother had me see a therapist a few times after the situation with the monster. I would go into the building first. I could still describe the brick L shaped building. After I came out my mother would go in. James and I would wait for what seemed like an eternity for her to come back out. When she finally walked out she seemed even more angry with me, I ended up thinking the therapist thought just like her.

Reason 3: The Uncontrollable

The state had clipboards. My mother had a phone and a story ready. My father was more concerned about his wallet. No one was looking at me.

So I stopped waiting to be caught. I became my own system: the one who left the room before the fists came out, the one who ran when James said run, the one who decided where to sleep and who to trust. No one else was going to do it.

That kind of freedom has a cost. When you catch yourself, there is no one else standing behind you when it goes wrong.

"... I understood that survival and safety are not the same thing."

Existential Symptoms

They mark me risk, treatment resistant in the chart,
Never mentioning the existing human heart.
They skim the file. They glance at the terms.
They measure the numbers to confirm.

Ideation is what they emphasize,
Despite all my rejected cries,
Ask me to agree and sign the line,
To whatever definition they assign.

But labels do not bleed or cry,
And labels do not wonder why.
I am just a girl, raw of bone,
With an identity of my own.

My want to die is not just a sound,
It's a symptom of what they haven't found.
If they read the person instead of the file,
They might find the girl beneath the profile.

I am more than just a will to cease,
A fractured mind in search of peace.
I'm tired of all the truth I've never shared,
And the pain, numbness, and being scared.

If they saw me as worthy from the start,
They'd focus on helping, not the paperwork part.
Don't just provide a mindful dream,
Or give me forms on self-esteem.

I am not the words you write about me,
Or how my chart labels me.
If you want to know the truth I carry,
You'll have to listen when I tell my story.

In-between: At twelve, I was so desperate to make everything stop. Somehow, I had decided I was tired, so tired of doing everything I could just to survive. I decided the only way to win was to stop playing.

I made a plan. I acted on the plan until I found myself waiting for the right moment. I waited and waited until I fell asleep. Eventually, I left it to fate because I was too scared to go through with it. I never told a soul. I believed they would negatively label me.

Those thoughts occurred throughout my life. As an adult, when I finally did ask for help, I was met with terms that seemed to boil down to a person flaw or a behavior problem. Treatment resistant. Ideation. Disorder. Risk.

I understand that these words have clinical purposes. But there is a difference between describing what is happening to someone and making the description sound like the explanation for why it is happening.

The Controlled Chaos

There was the new man in my mother’s life,
But they didn't marry for years to keep the checks.
A shadow in the records, hiding from the strife,
So she could live off the state and the support she expects.
To the government, he wasn't ever seen
But he was the pulse in the house’s machine.

He was never mean to me, he was kind.
He stayed away and never raised a hand.
They said his violent outrages were a clouded mind,
That the alcohol took the wheel as he had planned.
But I saw the truth in the silence of my room:
He never hurt me, so he chose the target of the doom.

The fights were a ritual they practiced on the floor.
She was the one who became belligerent first.
Screaming until the breath could take no more,
Striking him until his anger finally burst.
He would hit to contain her, or hit to hurt,
While the kitchen became a place of glass and dirt.

I learned the timing of the first loud crash.
When the shouting started, I would usually leave.
Walking out the door before the sudden flash,
Finding a different air so I could breathe.
But James could never stand to watch the blows;
He threw his smallness in as the violence grows.

James was the one who wore the evidence.
He emerged from the kitchen black and blue.
A map of the punches, his only defense,
Paying the price for the two people he knew.
The "uncontrollable" rage always found a target,
But it bypassed me, a choice I won't forget.

DSHS arrived and took us away to a home,
But the "safety" they promised was another lie.
Under unfamiliar ceilings, we were forced to roam,
With new threats hiding as the days went by.
We sat in counseling and answered what they asked,
While the fear of the foster home remained unmasked.

The system is a circle, not a straight line.
After the sessions, they sent us back to the house.
Back to the man who was kind, until the wine,
Back to the tiger and the quiet mouse.
We walked through the door to the same old smell,
Choosing the familiar over the new kind of hell.

Long after I was gone, the cycle reached its end,
When she drove a blade deep into his chest.
The hospital saved his life, but the violence died.
After, they stayed together, putting the fury to rest.
He stopped the hitting once he felt the cold steel;
They lived in the quiet of a wound that wouldn't heal.

In-between: The adults called it uncontrollable. Alcohol, his military experience, whoever had pushed his buttons that day. It was never uncontrollable. He never once raised a hand to me. He chose his target, which means he was making a choice.

I sat through the counseling afterward while the adults explained themselves to each other, and I recognized even then that they were telling the story in whatever way protected them. Then we were sent back.

The same word, uncontrollable, is the one used for my own mind in these pages too. It says something that his rage earned him an excuse, and my pain earned me a diagnosis.

He only stopped when my mother put a blade in him. Nothing the system tried came close.

The Normal Lessons

I walked through the doors to the world of the bright,
A girl made of glass trying hard to be right.
The bells were a signal, the hallways were long,
I hummed to myself a quiet, blurred song.
I carried the proof: I was never quite **normal**.

With James as my teacher, I learned how to think,
To follow the letters and watch the words link.
Though spelling was magic I'd yet to command,
My mind was a library few understand.
I hid in the truth: I was never quite **normal**.

The children played games on the grass in the sun,
They laughed in a rhythm of frolic and fun.
I watched from the edges, a ghost in the square,
With the weight of the Wait in the scent of the air.
I guarded the secrets of never quite **normal**.

They treated me strangely, a freak in the hall,
A girl who was silent, a girl who was small.
I didn't much care for the names that they threw,
For I lived in a world they never quite knew.
Their whispers reminded: You'll never be **normal**.

Then something went awry—a sound or a light—
And I fell through the floor to the basement of fright.
I crawled under a table—a corner—a space,
While teachers peered in at my colorless face.
Even my terror was never quite **normal**.

They called out for James for the bond they could see,
The only one trusted to reach out for me.
He crawled to my side and he spoke through the fear,
Then stood ten feet tall so the path would be clear.
He stood as a shield for a girl who wasn't **normal**.

The nurse's white station was quiet and still,
A rubbing-alcohol pause where the world had no will.
When Dad took my hand, James returned to his seat,
A soldier of silence who walked on his feet.
I learned in that room, I would never be **normal**.

In-between: I was excited about going to school. Because I had been told I wasn't smart enough, I never expected to be considered normal. Most of what I knew about school came from television and from James telling me about his days.

The school I imagined was different from the one I entered. The children were different. The rules were different. It didn't take long to realize that I was the one who was different.

Once, I told girls in my class a little about the monster. When I came in from lunch recess, the blackboard said: "We don't like girls like Connie." The teacher erased it, but the damage was permanent. It was the day I learned that the truth could make me an outcast. Now, as I write this, I have to wonder: if I allow people to read this, what will the blackboard say this time?

I worked hard to mimic the other children, but I could never make myself believe that I belonged among them.

Hiding in Words

It was a sudden impulse, not a plan,
As down the vacant schoolroom floor I ran.
I sought the shadow of a closet space,
To hide the frantic panic of my face.

At first I feared the air would quickly fail,
Within the confines of that narrow veil.
But with the secret goal I hoped to find,
I left the terror of the dark behind.

I built a barricade of books by night,
Beside a pane that held the fading light.
I tracked each noise moving through the hall
Until the printed words consumed it all.

Then far away a sudden vacuum whined,
Disturbing what my shelter had designed.
I placed the volumes on a wooden table,
And sought the closet till my breath was stable.

The outer lock rattled against the sheet,
The door swung wide upon the hall's retreat.
She dumped the bin without a single sound,
And dragged the plastic lining to the ground.

The motor roared across the open space,
While I stood frozen in my hiding place.
The janitor completed her routine,
And left me locked inside the dark unseen.

I left the vault to claim a single text,
Uncertain of the hours that followed next.
I strained my aching eyes against the night,
Unwilling to surrender to the light.

When morning broke I took the largest volume there,
And slipped away before the structured care.
I found a stall inside the restroom space,
And read in silence in that hidden place.

I kept as quiet as a churchyard mouse,
Until the morning populated the schoolhouse.
I stepped back out into the crowded track,
As if I never had been looking back.

In-between: No one noticed I was gone.

I returned the next morning in the exact same clothes I had left in and walked through the front door. No teacher, no administrator, no one at home said a single word.

The scariest part of the night was not the janitor, the darkness, or being locked inside the closet. It was the silence when I returned. I had disappeared for an entire night, and the world had continued moving without registering my absence.

I planned to do it again. Next time I would bring a flashlight and real supplies. I thought about what I would carry, which closet I would choose, and which books I would stack first.

I never tried it again. But planning it gave me something the rest of my life rarely did … a problem I could solve.

One Shattered Girl

Two shattered girls, invented whole,
Handed to me to steady my soul.
Not born of blood, but born of lies,
Two porcelain guards with painted eyes.

These two young girls stand at my side,
Facing out, their china wide.
Between them, caught in glass and clock,
I am the trapped in the water; they, the rock.

Their interrupted childhood, drawn so bright,
Grew into rooms I built at night.
Of make-believe, the girls were told,
A rescue built from a lie grown old.

He spoke of girls who broke the chain,
Of a mother brave who stopped the pain.
I felt so sure the monster died,
But learned too late … my father lied.

I mourned two sisters made of air,
And built them life I couldn't share.
I looked for them in every face,
Until the truth erased their place.

I chose to trust, and trust was all,
No warning came before the fall.
A voice I leaned on, once seemed true,
Spoke words that split my world in two.

So here I stand, what's left of me tight,
While porcelain falls on either side.
The big lie's current, long and deep,
Is mine alone now, mine to keep.

Only one shattered girl, my spirit torn in two.

In-between: My father traded my reality for his own convenience at least a year after the monster left. To stop my fear from disrupting his life, he constructed a cinematic ending for the monster.

He told me the monster had moved in with a mother and her two girls. A "Mother Brave" had discovered his nature and cut his brake lines, killing him in a fiery crash. In my mind, she was a hero. She reminded me of Margaret Houlihan from M.A.S.H.—sharp, capable, and fearless.

I didn't just hear the story; I inhabited it. I imagined their room, their toys, and their lives. I looked at every girl I passed in the street, wondering whether she was one of them or whether I already knew them without knowing our connection.

When the truth surfaced, I didn't just discover that the monster was alive. I had to mourn the sisters I had spent so much time imagining and caring about.

The two shattered girls had never existed. I was the one shattered girl.

Sparkling Cider

Sparkling Cider: Exhaustion

Helplessness is just exhaustion disguised as a fact,
The heavy, cold weight of my stepbrother's act.
When my breath was gone and my body turned to stone,
I fled the "me" that the right world had known.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

The first few hits began within the kitchen space,
A sudden shock, a blur against my face.
By the time I hit the dining room and wood,
He straddled me exactly where I stood.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

The punches landed on my shoulder and my head,
I felt the weight of every word he said.
My hands were up to shield the breaking bone,
Pinned and terrified—utterly alone.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

His other fist then struck my chest and side,
There was no corner where my ribs could hide.
I tried to twist and turn within his grip,
To find a way to let the shadows slip.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

The air was forced from deep within my lungs,
A silence born of heavy, violent tongues.
I felt as though I was glued against the floor,
Without the strength to fight him anymore.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

His mother stood and watched it from the door,
She feared his anger and the dining room floor.
She called his name and begged for him to stop,
While watching every heavy hammer drop.
Boom, and boom boom.
Right, left. Right.

Hopelessness is just exhaustion disguised as a fact,
The permanent ghost of a mind that has cracked.
I'll say the words: I did give up that day.
I let the strength and fighting slip away.
Boom, and boom boom.

Hopelessness is just exhaustion disguised as helplessness.

In-between: His mother stood in the doorway the entire time. She told me afterward that he suffered from explosive rage, and that she didn't step in because she was afraid of what he'd do to her too. I didn't yet have a word for what it costs a body to keep fighting something it cannot win. I just knew that day I stopped – Just stopped.

Sparkling Cider: The Clearing

The rhythm stopped, the weight began to lift,
The world became a blurred and violent shift.
I had no air, my lungs were tight and dry,
I had no voice to scream or even cry.
I forced my legs to find the kitchen door,
To leave the "me" still glued upon the floor.

I ran beyond the porch and through the yard,
The winter air was breathing fast and hard.
I followed where the river carved the ground,
The only path where safety might be found.
My body was a ghost of ache and strain,
A vessel fueled by terror and by pain.

I reached the clearing where the trees grew thin,
And felt the coldness press against my skin.
I could not sit, I could not even slouch;
No chair could hold me, nor the softest couch.
The only way to pull the oxygen back,
Was lying flat against the frozen track.

My swollen eye began to drift and close,
As purple shadows bloomed around my nose.
The jaw was thick, a heavy mask of lead,
The "booms" were ringing deep inside my head.
My very ear was thrumming with the blow,
A silent drum that wouldn't let me go.

I lay there staring at the empty sky,
Too tired to live, but not allowed to die.
I made a vow within that pulsing pain,
I'd never feel that helpless state again.
No matter what the cost or future price,
I would not let my soul be broken twice.

In-between: Everything before this had felt endless. I never knew if or when it would stop, or whether it ever would. I couldn't predict any of it. I could only survive it.

Lying on that frozen ground was the first time I made a decision about what came next, instead of just waiting to find out. I would never feel that helpless again, no matter what it cost me.

Sparkling Cider: The Broken

The ring of the phone—a high, silver race,
Two shadows colliding in a narrow space.
He pushed and I stumbled, I lost every beat,
With the weight of the "Helpless" beneath my own feet.
His anger would overtake me.

I reached for the bottle, for the Sparkling Cider,
To silence the terror screaming deep inside there.
I swung with the logic of fear and of dread,
A green-glass petition for the blood to be shed.
I attacked the explosion.

I don't know the count or the path of the swing,
Or if glass on the bone is a merciful thing.
I was back on the floor, nearly glued to the grain,
Until a kick broke the rhythm of anger and pain.
A boom from the ground.

He hit the drywall with a sickening crack,
A scarlet graffiti on his path to the back.
Like a dark animation, the blood started to slide—
A cartoonish leak from the anger inside.
The wall wore his mark.

The mother stepped in with a scream for the floor,
While I watched the "Rage" not move anymore.
They carried him out to the hospital light,
While I sat in the wreckage of my own dark fight.
Not a word was said.

Four sets of stitches, the head shaven bare,
Bandages and icepacks masking a stare.
He sat in his room on suicide watch,
While Fear counted out the depth of the notch.
I was still alone.

In-between: Once his mother saw his blood instead of mine, her own safety suddenly mattered less.

After my beating, I was forced to go straight back to school with my eye swollen shut, ribs taped up, and everyone stared. He never attended school again. He eventually killed himself about a decade and a half later. I can't help wondering how things might have gone differently.

Living Wherever

In the park, where the evening is heavy and long,
The world is reduced to the tree frog's song.
He isn't screaming for mercy or a soul to save,
But calling for heat—the one comfort he craves.
A rhythmic machine that refuses to rest,
With a pulse like a hammer in a green, tiny chest.

I track the vibration through bark and through vine,
Until my feet press that invisible line.
The distance of silence is a vacant, sharp thing;
I'd hold my own breath just to hear the woods ring.
The river pulses, grinding down stone—
A mirror to blood in a body alone.

"Wherever" is no longer a map or a street,
But the silt in my nails and the mud on my feet.
Like a creature that burrows in grit and in sand,
I've hidden my world in the dark of the land.
The ghosts in the daylight move by in a blur,
Indifferent to shadows or a life in the stir.

I wear a false face like a seasonal skin,
Locking the weight of the loneliness in.
I am warm in the belly of a plastic shell,
Rich with the scent of a fresh-shoveled well.
It smells of the damp and of newly turned earth;
I sat in the blackness for all I was worth.

I don't count the days or the way I arrived,
I've simply accepted the way we've survived.
It's easy to claim that the heart has gone numb,
But I feel the rhythm—the thrum, thrum, thrum.
In the glare of the noon, I walk with the crowd,
Wearing a silence both heavy and loud.

With fingers like anchors, I’m croaking that call,
Building a song just to lean on a wall.
But if a hand reaches, or the line is crossed thin,
The music goes dead as the silence pulls in.
I don't need a home or a hand to be free—
I’ll simply go back to the roots of the tree.

In-between: For a time, my life actually felt fine. The weight of everyone else's expectations was gone. There was no one to answer to, no monster to perform for, and no one to depend on.

I was finally in charge of myself.

I had friends and acquaintances, but my real life happened in hidden places: a lean-to in the park or vacant houses. I didn't see these places as home. I saw them as opportunities. I intended for it to be temporary, until I figured out something else.

For the first time, the silence was my choice.

That choice mattered to me. So did what happened when I lost control of the situation. There was no mother to point to or father to hold accountable. The decisions were mine, and so was the responsibility I placed on myself.

Forever, Polluted Waters

The sun didn't flicker, the trail didn't bend,
I followed the path like a newly met friend.
I ignored the shadow, the snap of a limb,
Until the bright edges of vision grew thin.
The thought was too massive, too heavy to know,
So I watched how the wet leaves started to glow.

I was off-kilter, a spirit coming loose,
A phantom-break, a tightening noose.
A punch to the gut, then twist to the arm,
Turned my weight into lead as he did me harm.
His breath was a fever, a stale, heavy weight,
That forced me to choke on the bitter taste of hate.

I clawed at the earth, a desperate strain,
Through blackberry briars that drank the rain.
They hooked in my skin, a tangled arrest,
As his sour scent settled like iron on my chest.
I commanded my spirit, I shouted to run,
But my muscles were water, my power undone.

I waited for mercy, for one final blow,
With only his gasps—hot, frantic, and slow.
I begged him to finish, to silence the sound,
To trade in this terror for a place underground.
I lay in the soil, a frame cast aside,
With the smell of him rising—a dark, choking tide.

Minutes stretched into the hours he stole,
While I grappled with what I couldn't control.
Though the clock barely moved, it felt like forever,
Testing the bone and the skin and the tether.
I clung to the ache, to the raw laceration,
Mapping the path of my mind’s dislocation.

I lay in the debris where the stillness fell,
Dissecting the cracks in my physical shell.
The scent of him lingers, a heavy residue,
A cloud in the air that I cannot subdue.
The weight of the shattering—a permanent bruise,
A distraction from things I was forced to lose.

I slumped near a tree wearing gnarled, grey skin,
Until the roar of his engine grew distant and thin.
Then a frantic flight through the thorns and the mud,
Where the blackberry briars were thirsty for blood.
Stumbling toward the river's shallow keep,
Where the secrets of earth were silent and deep.

Where red petals spilled from the teeth of the vine,
A harvest of hurt that was bitterly mine.
I plunged in the chilly and heartless tide,
With nowhere left for a spirit to hide.
The rocks were soft, slick with moss and decay,
As I knelt in the silt to scrub him away.

I watched the river drag the shock downstream,
But the scent on my skin was a piercing scream.
I had never looked through the water so clear,
Until it reflected the shape of my fear.
The darkness rose—the water's pollution;
For a mind seeking safety, there's no absolution.

I see them now—those shallows of impurity,
Where I traded the current for a false security.
The surface is glass, but the depths are a lie,
Beneath the cold shimmer
where the old versions come to die.

Forever, I am fighting the current in Polluted waters.

In-between: This was incredibly hard to write.

I had made it to the river and tried to wash away the smell of him, the blood, and whatever I could not yet put into words.

For a while, I could not separate what had happened from everything around me. It almost felt like the glass of water had become the waves of the river. Something ordinary could suddenly feel connected to something much larger and much harder to escape.

I had gone to the river to wash him away. Instead, the river became part of what I carried with me.

Father knows Best

I staged the scene at the edge of the light,
A girl in her best, prepared for the night.
Cleaned in a stranger's shower, face painted thin,
To hide the erosion of the place I had been.
I knew he was off, that the workday was through,
So I waited for the man that I thought I knew.

I held the yogurt and peanut-butter sticks,
While watching the clock in its unyielding ticks.
I wasn't hungry—the food was for show,
A way to be steady, with nowhere to go.
I needed the rhythm, the bite, and the plastic,
To keep my own mind from becoming too drastic.

He sat on the wood, the air turned to lead,
Small-talk and shadows of things left unsaid.
I asked for the family, I fished for a sign,
To see if a home could ever be mine.
He didn't see the girl; he didn't see the need,
He saw a garnishment, a debt, and a greed.

Are you here for the money?—the primary sting,
As if a daughter were a transactional thing.
He counted the support that the mother had bled,
While I sat at the table and wished I were dead.
The escape route was open, the silence cut deep,
He handed me back to the dark and the street.

He offered no shelter, no home, no space,
I asked for a father, he left me no place.

In-between: He asked no questions about where or how I was living, despite the years that had hollowed out the distance between us. I was auditioning for a ceiling, but he was auditing a checkbook. To him, my existence was a financial penalty being deducted from his wages; by paying the bare minimum the state required, he believed he had settled his debt to the universe.

Ten years later, his wife kicked him out, and he came to me. He didn't meet me in a park with a dollar's worth of yogurt and a Chico stick to use as a utensil. He simply moved into my spare room.

For nine months, I carried the man who had once treated my survival as an unfair hit to his paycheck. And even then, under my ceiling, he never hesitated to ask for more.

alleyways

the pavement was wet with an iron-cold smell,
behind basement windows—a barred, urban cell.
i walked in there willing, but stepped in a snare,
and found there was NO exit, just ash in the air.

the night wasn't silent, i wasn't alone,
his performance diminished, his violence was shown.
he blamed and he broke as the darkness took shape,
i was sure he would kill me—there was NO escape.

i saw myself go away dead and completely still,
i fought him again, a desperate will.
NO words can erase the red pain in the mind,
as violence helped him leave the stain far behind.

exhaustion and hurt won, the room became vast,
i drifted away until consciousness passed.
then i stealthed through the shadows, still in his grasp,
with NO sound at all, but a splintered wood clasp.

i swung with my might at the man where he lay,
a wooden petition to make him stay away.
NO effect. he moved barely a hair in his sleep,
while i crawled back to the bed, a secret to keep.

i saw the red blood in his nose—it was his,
a small, scarlet sign of the horror this is.
i scrambled for glass and the rain and the sky,
as the alleyway watched with a soulless eye.

i hid in the garbage. NO breath. NO sound.
watching the window. NO safety found.
then i ran—and i ran—and i—NO. —i ran,
a ghost being hunted by a shadow-man.

i slept in the bushes, in dirt, and in frost,
bleeding, bruised, and broken, the heavy price cost.
NO rescue was coming, the days turned to grey,
as i starved in the cold for a way to get away.

at the truck stop i stood with the phone in my hand,
a line to the world from a desolate land.
i called out to james, told the truth of the blow,
but he was NO help, NO "somewhere" to go.

he was helpless and worried, he offered NO home,
just a word in the dark for a soul left to roam.
he only said, "RUN," and he hung up the phone,
NO way he could reach me, i was truly alone.

i did what he said, and i fled from the place,
with the rain and the terror still damp on my face.
i am running today through this dark cityscape,
but i'm finding, forever alleyways, there's NO escape.

In-between: Every assault before this one, I survived by disappearing: becoming the statue, the mannequin, the witness watching from somewhere else. This time I finally hit him. It didn't stop him. All I could do was run, but it was my only option to force my body to do something other than freeze.

The Interruption

This was the fracture, the permanent split,
The point where the psyche unraveled and bit.
I traded the surface, the day, and the light,
For the machinery running the terrors of night.
The event is a fixture, a black, iron growth,
A vault for the secrets that swallowed my oath.

A dream starts as misty, a widening blank,
Before I am dragged to the alleyway's flank.
Stale beer and candle wax thicken the air,
With wet cigarettes and a chemical flare.
The pavement surges, the oxygen dies,
As now is consumed by the grit in my eyes.

Once the trap has been set for the reach of my thought,
The self that was sleeping is suddenly caught.
The daylight abandons the room to the wall,
Where gravity tightens and triggers the fall.
I'm afraid of the mattress, afraid of the bed,
Of the alleyway wired and live in my head.

I fight off the rhythm of closing my eyes,
Because sleep is the auction where silence complies.
I wake with a wrench, and the vision is gone,
To freeze in the grey of the counterfeit dawn.
It isn't the monsters I see that I dread,
It's the silent one already under the spread.

There is no outrunning the weight of the error,
The alleyway is the architecture of terror.

NO escape.

In-between: After everything I had lived through, I was surprised by what remained with me.

My waking days were haunted, but my nightmares kept returning to the alleyways. That one event seemed to become the point where everything changed.

I asked for help.

When James told me to run, I ran back toward another life. I began looking for something I had never really had before: permanence, stability, and consistency. I wasn't looking only for somewhere to escape to. I was looking for somewhere I could stay.

The memory of that night has never been simple. I remember what happened, but I also fear what I may have forgotten.

Reason 4: The Weight of the Wall

"The shield was made of peanut butter and silence, until the debt became too heavy for a brother to carry."

James took the brunt first, then took his chance and finally his potential. I don't blame him. But the counterweight left with him, and what remained was the full weight of a history with only one person left to hold it.

The Unshared

Nothing I covet holds a gleam,
No prize of silver, or a dream.
My triumphs fade to brittle rust,
A silent, vacant monument of dust.
The only things for which I've cared
Are the small moments that I've shared.

As a girl, I held a perfect A,
And ran home with it on display.
I searched the halls for a loving face,
But found only empty, silent space.
I was met with an indifferent glance;
My small triumph held no chance.

I turned to find my brother to confide,
And watched his face, so full of pride.
My tiny triumph became a bond,
A quiet promise that went beyond.
He made my victory real,
A shared joy I could truly feel.

I harvest this world entirely alone,
From bitter seeds that I have sown.
His memory, a fading light,
A ghostly comfort through the night.
I feel his absence, a vacant space,
The chill of a warmth I can't embrace.

I stand on stage, a great award,
A triumph that the crowd adores.
But empty silence haunts my ears,
A prize that marks my lonely years.

The applause is just a deafening sound

Without my brother's voice around.
I hold only what's been given,
An unshared life is not worth living.
The trophy has no one to show,
A lonely story only I know.

A silent, solitary worth,
A final thought I can't let go:
If there is no one left to share,
Do I have any worth at all?

In-between: James was always proud of me. I never questioned that. I valued his pride because he knew what mattered to me. He knew the difference between something I had actually worked for and something I had simply been expected to do. When other people overlooked my accomplishments, James noticed them.

He knew the person behind them. That mattered more to me than the accomplishment itself.

Plenty of Food Here

He was the "Possible," the people would keep,
Who called in the night when the house was asleep.
"There's plenty of food here," his voice would entreat,
A bribe for the sister he left on the street.

He'd beg every stranger and friend that he knew,
To open a door and to let me come through.
He sold me to teachers and kids at the park,
A light that he carried to quiet the dark.

He'd boast to the walls and shout to the hall,
That I was the greatest, the best of them all.
The name was a shadow, a ghost in the flame;
I was just "James's Sister," his pride and his claim.

He'd vouch for my spirit and swear on my grace,
Just to see me arrive at a "Safe" kind of place.
I was the hero in stories he'd tell,
While we navigated that family hell.

But the phone doesn't ring, nothing left to be said,
The "Possible" boy isn't, now that he's dead.
"There's plenty of food," is the whisper I hear,
The nightmare of his hope and of his cheer.

I wake to the damage where death went through,
To a table for one that was meant to be two.
The "Plenty" he promised is ash on my tongue,
Feeding on ghosts since the day we were young.

In-between: When James said, “There's plenty of food here,” he wasn't only talking about eating. Those five words implied much more. They meant shelter, safety, no beating, no locked doors, and, of course, food.

After James died, I began having nightmares in which he told me there was plenty of food and asked me to join him, where he could protect me. I would follow him, and then he would turn around. I would see his death in gory, terrible visual detail, like a camera panning around him while he cradled a phone.

That was my nightmare. I began to believe he really did want me to join him.

James's Sister

He called across the distance, urgent and clear,
Come on, there's plenty — plenty of food here.
Not just the bread or the butter or the plate,
But the language we shared for a different kind of state.

He'd told them already, the students, the staff,
The sister who was coming, the better half.
He'd furnished the world before I walked in,
Built the room and set the table and let the light begin.

Are you James's sister? the hallways would say,
A name I could carry through each new day.
Not Constantina, not Connie, not blame,
Just James's sister, the best of all names.

Try out, he said, it's a good way to make friends,
A practical kindness that never condescends.
I was new and unknown, with no ground to stand,
But James had already prepared the land.

I looked up once from the gymnasium floor,
Not knowing what I was even trying for.
And there he was, highest up in the stands,
My cheerleader, certain and clapping his hands.

I made the team. He never had a doubt,
He saw me whole before I figured it out.
He believed it before he ever picked up the phone,
James seeing me clearly meant I wasn't alone.

In-between: James was proud of me before I had done anything to earn it. He told people about his sister before I even arrived.

I have to be honest: I hated being James's sister. I wanted my own name, my own ground, my own introduction. At school, I was often known through him before anyone knew me as Constantina.

What I could not see then was what his name had already given me. James had prepared a place for me before I ever walked into it.

The irony was that James was the one who deserved the pride. He built friendships, earned trust, made people feel important, and somehow had enough left over to furnish a world for his sister before she arrived. He talked me onto that gymnasium floor not because he needed to see me succeed, but because he already believed I would.

I became a cheerleader. James already was one.

And I was too busy resenting his name to understand that wearing it was the closest thing to safety.

James had a world of his own before I entered it. Students knew him. Staff knew him. He had friendships, confidence, and a way of making people believe in something before it happened. He could walk into a room and make a place for someone else.

The Canal

In the summer when I turned nine,
We walked to find the water line.
We hiked up to the hill that day,
To wash the baking heat away.

We waded into the rushing pull,
Where the irrigation channel ran full.
But hidden debris down below trapped my feet,
And pulled me where the depths and darkness meet.

The rushing current claimed my gasping frame,
The rising water choked me as it came.
I fought the river's brutal force to breathe,
As the cold weight dragged me underneath.

I felt his pull before I saw his face,
He drove into the rushing, drowning space.
He swam beneath the swirling dark below,
And matched his strength against the undertow.

He freed my leg and let me rise,
I climbed out right before his eyes.
I only cared to catch my breath,
Until his scream brought fear of death.

A jagged piece of iron, old,
Was resting in the shadows cold.
It cut a heavy line of red,
Across his leg on the riverbed.

If people ask about it all,
He says he got it in the canal.
He tells them how he tore his skin,
But hides the drowning I was in.

In-between: The canal is one of the clearest memories I have of James simply being my brother.

At almost 11 years old, he jumped into the water without hesitation, freed my trapped leg, and got me out. He cut his own leg on the debris and then told people he had been hurt in the canal without telling them why he had gone into the water.

I watched him do versions of this throughout our childhood: take the damage, try and make sure I was safe, and say very little about what it cost him.

Composed and Decomposed

I am a melody scored for two,
A harmony I never wrote alone with you.
The verse still holds the shape of your refrain,
A counterpoint I can't quite sing again.
I listen for the chord beneath the strain,
And wonder what will finally remain.

My name, a key signature carved in place,
My age, the tempo marking none erase.
My lineage, a bassline running deep,
A steady rhythm underneath my sleep.
The family chord progression, wide and low,
A cadence I never chose, but had to know.

The past is just a symphony of years,
Of minor movements built from unshed tears.
The history I carry like a score,
The measures I've repeated times before.
I am the sum of every verse and rest,
A composition I once thought was blessed.

They called me steady, or perhaps too loud,
The critique given by an early crowd.
Legato soft, or sharp and quick to flare,
The dynamic markings I still must wear.
These annotations shape the sound I give,
The way the melody must bend to live.

But when the other voice no longer plays,
The harmony dissolves before new days.
The shared refrain, once vivid, live, and true,
Becomes a silence I can't listen through.
With no one left to hold the second part,
The song I was begins to fall apart.

And if I fade, the harmony won't stay,
The final measures soften and decay.
If the last listener leaves the empty hall,
Then every note I played begins to fall.
The music ends, the silence turns to gray,
And all the unheard verses fade away.

In-between: For weeks in my freshman year, cards kept appearing in my locker, with an image including parts of album covers on the front, lines of the popular songs on the back.

It was from a secret admirer, little did I know it was from a group of James's friends. All the names on them were hidden somehow, so for a long time I had no idea who was leaving them.

I eventually noticed a "K" worked into one of the drawings, a pyramid sketch, hidden in the linework where I wouldn't have caught it if I hadn't looked twice. Once I found that one initial, I went back and started searching for the rest, and found the other five boys' names hidden the same way.

I'd given James my locker combination at the start of the year and completely forgotten.

Without James, those messages would never have been composed. Without James, that memory slowly decomposes.

The Frequency of Fade

James found a brass trumpet, a thrift-store prize,
Dusted with history and a musician's eyes.
At ten years of age, with a frame slight and thin,
He taught his own spirit to breathe through the tin.

He mastered the staff, the sharp, and the flat,
While hiding the corners where the shadows sat.
Through school music rooms, he followed the track,
From Rock Around the Clock to the edge of the black.

He leaned into rhythm to steady his pulse,
When the "Normal" around him was empty and false.
With Too Much Time on My Hands and the clocks,
He fumbled for keys to the heavy steel locks.

When the house hummed with a wire-thin silence,
Between water and fire and shadows of violence,
We tuned to the MAS*H unit—something to hold—
Where "Painless" dampened the cold.

As years added weight, he reached for the wood,
To speak through the strings as best as he could.
He rode the rails of a Crazy Train floor,
While searching for "Solutions" behind a closed door.

He kept a guitar from a second-hand shelf,
And dreamed of a sound far bigger than himself.
He'd fuss with the strings, chasing the tune in his head,
A hero rehearsing for a life he'd never lead.

There was no score for the weight in his heart,
Just a cue-sheet to tell him the "When" of the part.
On Fade to Black, he left the final instruction:
"Play this at my wake"—his final production.

In-between: James was an artist and had a musician's ear. Music and art were not simply escapes for him. They were part of how he understood the world.

Everyone at his wake brought up how he'd fuss over this one guitar and it somehow still never sounded quite right. I don't think it was really about the sound.

He had his own interests, his own humor, and his own way of hearing things. The music remained one of the few ways I could recognize pieces of him that belonged entirely to him.
He was more than the role he had played for me.

Songs referenced in this piece:

- "Rock Around the Clock" — Bill Haley & His Comets
- "Too Much Time on My Hands" — Styx
- theme from M*A*S*H ("Suicide Is Painless") — Johnny Mandel / Mike Altman
- "Crazy Train" — Ozzy Osbourne
- "Suicide Solution" — Ozzy Osbourne
- "Juke Box Hero" — Foreigner
- "Fade to Black" — Metallica

The Weight of the Wall

The bus reached the pines and the cold northern rain,
But James brought the desert, its ghosts, and its pain.
The boy who stood steady, the wall and the shield,
Carried the wounds that would never be healed.

He smuggled the peanut butter, cheese, and the bread,
But starved on the words that were left in his head.
He took every blow that the monster could throw,
Hiding an emptiness that started to grow.

The lifeline I leaned on was frayed at the strand,
Slipping away from my small, reaching hand.
He decided at last that the debt was too deep,
And traded his watch for a permanent sleep.

I look in the mirror and search for his face,
In the quiet of rooms and the void of his space.
The monster is gone, and the mother is cold,
But James paid the price for the lies that she told.

I am the witness, the one left behind,
With the scraps of a life that we struggled to find.
The scapegoat is living, the protector is gone,
But the love of a brother is what carries on.

In-between: When the bus arrived in the cold northern rain, the physical landscape changed, but James carried the same history with him.

He had spent much of his childhood taking care of things that should never have been his responsibility. He found food, tried to find places for me to stay, took punishment meant for me, and kept trying to make the world safer than it was.

He never had a protector of his own. Without a doubt he was everything to me, but what others may have missed, he wasn't able to save me, protect me, or keep me from danger. As a child he did the most important thing anyone could have, he tried.

He was a child doing a job no child could actually complete and that was the weight of the wall.

The Ghost of the Alternate

If I didn’t exist, he would still be alive,
With no heavy burdens or need to survive.
He’d walk through the hallway, a boy on his own,
With no one to shield and no seeds of guilt sown.
The cupboards would groan with the weight of the bread,
And he’d still be breathing, with years left ahead.

He’d carry the world in the palm of his hand,
With no one to protect and no fate to withstand.
He could have been happy, he could have been free,
If he hadn't been anchored to someone like me.
The "Monster" would sleep in a silence so deep,
With no one to guard and no promise to keep.

He felt like a failure for being so small,
For the blows that he took and the ones he let fall.
Yet he offered his plate and he shared every crumb,
To quiet the hunger before it could come.
He starved in the shadows to keep me from harm,
The weight of my safety the strength in his arm.

He held me like gold in a world made of rust,
The only one left I could venture to trust.
He treated me like I was the soul of the earth,
While he paid the price for the day of my birth.
The blows would be fewer, the temper stayed thin,
If I hadn’t brought all the "Fever" within.

He didn't know then, in the heat of the strife,
That a child isn't meant to be anchor and life.
He spent every ounce of his "Possible" grace,
To buy me a seat in a much safer place.
He traded his future to settle my debt,
A hero whose sun was too early to set.

But the debt of the guardian is heavy and vast,
And the guilt of the hero, it broke him at last.
He shouldn't have had to be wall or the shield,
To a sister whose wounds were so slow to be healed.
He looked at the exit and saw it was wide,
With all of the pain he was keeping inside.

He gave me the world while his own fell apart,
The "possible" boy with a world-ending heart.
He loved me when no one else could or would try,
And left me behind with the "where" and the "Why."
I walk through the world that he bought with his breath;
He'd still be alive if it weren't for my birth.

In-between: I cannot know everything James might have become if I had never been there. That is the part that belongs to the alternate life. But I know something about the life he actually had.

The monster came into our home because I was there to be targeted. If I had never existed, this particular monster would not have had a reason to enter our house looking for me. That does not make me responsible for what he did. The responsibility belongs to the person who chose to do it. But it does mean James's childhood was changed by circumstances that began with my being there.

He was hurt because of what happened to me. He was locked in his room. He was punished when he tried to protect me. He became the person who watched the doors, found food, intervened when he could, and tried to make a place for me when there wasn't one.

I did not ask him to become that child. I was a child too. But he became him anyway.

That is the part I cannot erase by telling myself I was innocent. I was innocent of the monster's choices. I was not innocent of the fact that my existence was the reason this particular monster entered his life.

And I don't have to invent the boy James might have been.

There was a boy who watched television. A boy who roamed. A boy who had a life before protecting me became part of it. Somewhere between that boy and the brother I depended on, childhood became a job.

He was the good child. The possible child. And some of what was possible for him was spent making it possible for me to survive.

The Sibling Relics

We lay together in the quiet dust,
Two broken objects bound by slow, fixed rust.
We held our breath when silence meant the start,
We only shared the terror of the heart.
Our damage matched, a scar upon the face,
We found our safety in this lonely place.

We promised shelter in the darkest hour,
A fragile shield built on a fading power.
When the wind came, whispering cold and low,
We knew the awful path we had to go.
We had a secret language, sharp and mute,
The broken solace of a shared root.

Then, in a moment, sharp and quick and clean,
You left the empty darkness of the scene.
You chose the final stillness, shallow and deep,
An unspoken promise buried in sleep.
Your likeness lies scattered, shattered on the ground,
The liberty I've never truly found.

I am the sibling, left to stay behind,
A haunted echo in an empty mind.
The silence now is absolute and vast,
A faded reflection of a memory passed.
I look for comfort in the stubborn lie,
The lonely reasons why I chose not to die.

My shape is whole, I did not break,
Not for me but for his sake.
I yearn to shatter, to complete the fall,
To leave this chiseled burden, lose it all.

In-between: James and I shared things that no one else could have understood completely. We had our own language, our own memories, and our own ways of knowing when something was wrong.

There is a photograph of the two of us. Most people looking at it would probably see a picture of siblings. They might see two children, two faces, two scars, and assume it was something worth keeping.

I sometimes wonder whether anyone would want the picture if it contained only me.

James is part of what makes that photograph mean something to me. Without him, it would still show a child. It would still show my face. But it would no longer show the two people who knew what happened.

When he died, I didn't lose only my brother. I lost the other person who could say, "Yes. That happened."

That is part of what made the silence afterward so difficult.

The Unbalanced Swing

We were the halves, the counterweight and link,
Two figures sitting at the concrete brink.
The chains were bright, the metal cool and smooth,
Not meant to restrain but merely to soothe.

We shared the arc, the slow, predictable sway,
The rhythm of comfort, in work and in play.
Now you are gone, and half the seat is bare,
The balance wasn't equal and never fair.

The chains hang rigid, completely still,
Refusing to obey my fractured, guilty will.
I push against the ground with all my might,
But I cannot find the balance to survive the fight.

The chains still clatter, singing your old song,
A shifting memory that lasts too long.
I hear the creak, the rhythm we once knew,
The remembered comfort I still cling to.

I am the survivor left within the sun,
Two figures have now become one.
I am so alone since your wake,
I want the metal to just snap and break,

To join the final stillness you have found,
And let the broken structure hit the ground.
I am the swing, locked up by the chains,
Defined by iron and lasting pain.

In-between: I think the imbalance was never simply about who carried more weight as children. I had come to treat James's presence as something permanent.

"He's always there" became a fact of nature instead of something he chose, over and over, at a cost to himself.

I never thought to ask whether the person holding everything up needed someone to check on him too. Not because I didn't love him, but because surviving leaves very little room to look sideways at the person surviving beside you.

The seat beside me is empty. I know now that it was never supposed to be empty.

Who or Whom?

Who hurt who?
I am angry at the exit, at the abandonment, the door,
The way you left your sissy standing—shielded no more.
I'm used to being traded, used to losing all my luster,
But you had more strength than I could ever muster.
Am I angry at the brutal way you chose to go,
Or at the pain you carried that I could never know?

Who hurt who?
I leaned on you, my wall; I hid behind you, my shield,
The Scavenger King who found what hunger concealed.
A target for the standard ones who sought but to destroy,
But you were eighteen months older, still a boy.
Did you break because I forgot that you were flesh and bone,
And left you holding up the wall alone?

Who hurt who?
Usually the audience gets bored and walks away,
When the record starts to skip and I have nothing new to say.
I never thought you'd find the music played a different song,
But we were the same record, the same scratches, the same wrong.
Did you stop hearing the harmony we lost and paid,
Or did the music simply fade?

Who hurt who?
The witness to the haunting that you feared the most,
If you were fleeing you, then I was just a ghost.
I tell myself it wasn't me, but I cannot look away.
The mirror you escaped still follows me today.
Was I a sanctuary where you could finally rest,
Or another place that carried what you could not confess?

Who hurt who?
I am angry. I am guilty. If the feelings don't stay the same,
I fear I will lose my brother again, and Sissy will lose her name.

In-between: James was a boy carrying a burden no child should have carried. I knew I needed him. I did not see that he needed me. His role had become so familiar that I mistook it for something permanent, something he could simply keep doing. I did not know to look at the person holding the wall and ask whether he was tired of holding it.

The circumstances of his death leave their own questions. I have tried to understand what it meant, but I cannot know what was happening inside him in those final seconds. I only know that the last question asked of him was, "What about Connie?"

And I am left with the question that has no answer: who hurt who?

I am so sorry, I Love You

The guilt was a scheme that had beckoned me there,
To breathe in the incense and funeral air.
They shifted the dates so my birthday was clear,
While I looked at the strangers and felt only fear.

No family was present, or so I had thought,
To honor the battle my brother had fought.
Then an older woman, with tears in her eyes,
Reached out to embrace me in scripted disguise.

I pushed her away from the skin she would claim,
She was an aunt, but I didn't know her name.
I am so sorry, I love you, she said,
A tribute of salt for the ghost of the dead.

She had vanished from sight since the age of five years,
Before all the scarring and all of the fears.
I wondered if she used that same vacant tone,
To offer James love while he suffered alone.

How easily people will spill out that word,
Ignoring the truth of the things they have heard.
They speak of a grace that they never did show,
To children they left hungry, beaten and low.

A glimpse of his mind started coming to me,
Of why he decided that death was the key.
Like a brother before him, he followed the path,
To find his own peace from the aftermath.

I am so sorry, I love you, they cry,
While they watch us remain and they watch us all die.
The best of solutions for hearts made of stone,
Was leaving the words and the wreckage alone.

I am so sorry, James. I know you loved me.

In-between: James not only took his life, but he also left me to die. James not only took his life; he left me with the belief that I had contributed to his death.

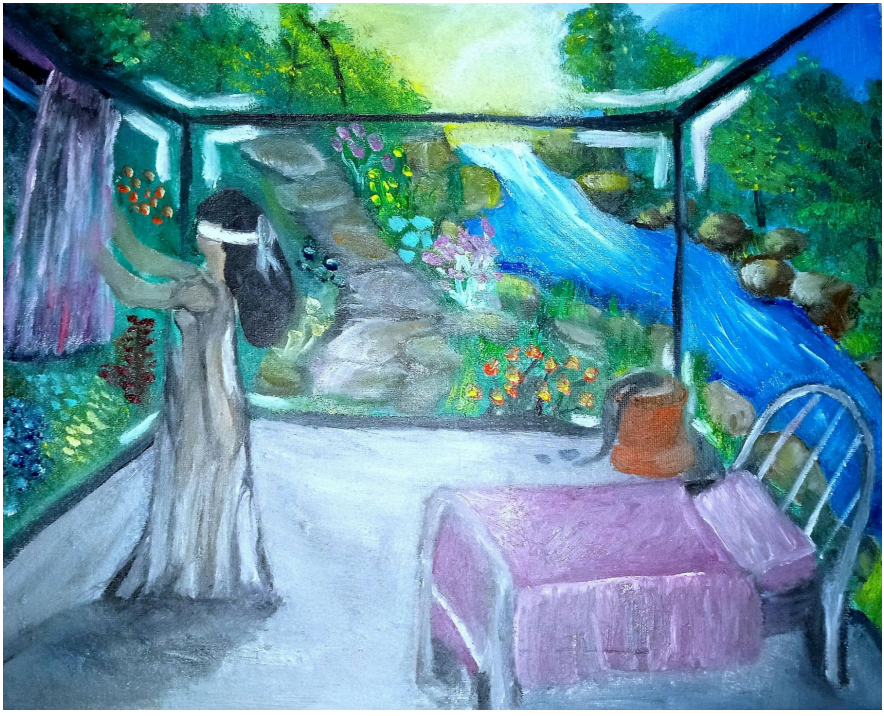
My estranged aunt at his funeral, I didn't recognize her. I was told who she was when she tried to touch me. She said, "I am so sorry. I love you." I didn't know her name. She had been gone since I was five, and she had known what our childhood was like.

What hurt was not simply that she had done nothing. It was hearing words of love from someone who had not been part of my life and did not know me.

Reason 5: The Dark Heart

When the wall fell, design didn't disappear — it migrated. The monsters had vanished and James had gone, but the structure they built remained, looking for a new occupant. It found one. Now I am the architect, the prisoner, and the guard. I wear the mask. I carry the blame. I want to be heard and fear anyone would listen. This is not a new chapter — it is what Reason 4 left behind

“I am the art of my own suffocation, and your applause is my annihilation.”



Unstable

Once the monster retreated and the world moved on,
Though he wasn't there, he was never quite gone.
I had spilled the secret; I had spoken his name,
And waited for punishment, fury, and blame.
He called me "Little Lady" while he stifled my breath,
A porcelain doll at the windows of death.

I shunned every pane and barricaded the door,
Then searched for the smallest of cracks in the floor.
I'd crawl behind dressers, in alcoves to hide,
Into any small space where a toy could have fit inside.
I called it my "nesting," a fortress of fear,
Hiding from windows where his face might appear.

I slept only in shifts, with one eye on the dark,
While nightmares left traces that burned like a mark.
I'd dream of a ball striking soft on my shoe,
Then rolling to roads where the tall grasses grew.
There in the asphalt, the monster would stand,
Reclaiming his prize with his cold, waiting hand.

The dream didn't end when the sun filled the sky;
Dark, piercing eyes watched from windows nearby.
A stain on the bleachers, a choke through the glass,
Following hours and the vehicles pass.
I erased my own features from noise and from sight,
To live as a trinket, too small to invite.

When I had to be seen, I learned how to hide,
By tucking myself somewhere deeper inside.
I'd stand in the open, a doll in the sun,
A face made of glass where no feeling could run.
I'd mimic the crowd and disappear in the blur,
A polished veneer where a child used to stir.

If I looked like the rest, then his eyes wouldn't linger,
I'd fade like the smoke from a dying ember.
Now the years have stretched out, and the bolts are all set,
But the mind is a house that does not forget.
A stale glass of water left out on the table
Can pull me back into the wreckage, unstable.

In an instant, I'm caught in the grasp of the dread,
Like a marionette pulled by the strings in my head.
I am safe in the daylight, polished and new,
But I'm still afraid that the monster isn't through.

In-between: After learning that the monster was still alive, I looked him up. I found court records, learned he had once lived within a hundred miles of me, and eventually found his current address across the country. Seeing the front of his house on a walking-view map triggered a level of fear I had not felt as an adult. I froze at the screen, convinced for a moment that he could somehow see me looking at him.

Reclaiming my name wasn't about strength, overcoming, or healing. I was still petrified. I wanted to give up. Reclaiming it was an attempt to face my own destruction.

The Structural Self

I live within a balance built of fear,
An engineered stability that's dear.
The structural choice is silence, cold and deep,
To keep the heavy truth from caving in.

The silence is the sealant, tight and thin,
It hides the joints where failure might begin.
I distribute the weight across the truss,
To purchase an adhesive fix for us.

But every spoken word becomes a shear,
Exposing the foundation to the clear, sharp air of fear.
The terrible sight of a pillar now removed,
It shows the load is real, not just inferred.

I live beneath the tension of the steel,
Aware of stress the surface can't reveal.
The price of this stability is high:
The self is strong, but no life can thrive nearby.

I choose the cold solace of the dead,
To keep the awful truth inside my head.
My safety is the promise of collapse,
Locked in the steel of these deliberate traps.

My structure holds; the steel is cold and whole,
It bought the silent safety of my soul.
But though the architecture is defined,
The bridge is only anchored to one side.

In-between: For years I thought the structure was the solution. The rigidity, the silence, the distance—those were the things that kept me from falling apart. I measured success by stability.

The structure has rules. I don't give out my phone number. I shake hands, but I don't hug. I watch a room and wait for someone else to start the conversation. I only reply to emails, never writing even my closest friends first.

What I didn't understand for a long time was that the structure was designed only to contain damage, not to support a life. It could prevent collapse, but it could not create connection. The bridge holds. It was never built to reach the other side.

Timelapse Nature Show

Seven years old in the dry Yuma heat,
A motel room door and the dust on the street.
The field in the back was a kingdom of weeds,
To hide all our secrets and satisfy needs.
We found an old boat like a ghost on the shore,
A carcass of wood that could sail no more.

We gathered the branches, the brush, and the vine,
To build a green wall and a boundary line.
We draped it in layers of camouflage skin,
To hide the small world we were playing within.
No adults could see us, no voices could stay,
To tell us "you can’t" or to take it away.

The morning arrived and we stripped back the shield,
To reveal the grey hull in the heart of the field.
I climbed to the gunwale to walk on the edge,
A narrow, sharp path like a mountain-top ledge.
I tested my balance, I reached for the sky,
While the sun burned a hole in the Arizona high.

But footing is fragile and balance is brief,
I slipped from the wood like a falling brown leaf.
I landed in shadows, in brushwood and boughs,
The discarded skin of the boat and its prows.
The foliage was soft and it cushioned my frame,
I lay there in silence and whispered my name.

Then came the movement, a thousand-fold itch,
The crawl of a shadow, the pull of a stitch.
The mountain was angry, the mound was a-fire,
And I was the heart of a stinging empire.
I did not scream out and I did not cry tears,
I froze in a vacuum of seven-year fears.

I looked toward James with a wide, glassy stare,
As red-armored venom climbed into my hair.
They hit me to save me, they struck at the red,
As the swarm of the field tried to claim me for dead.
The cold of the hose and the baking-soda whites,
To soothe away welts from the stings and the bites.

Now memory plays in a slow-motion loop,
Where the edges are thin and the shadows all stoop.
I am once again walking the rim of the boat,
Trying to keep my own spirit afloat.
I fear for my mind and I check every line,
To keep my own thoughts from a falling decline.

The camouflage hides what is waiting beneath,
A landscape of hunger with million-fold teeth.
James isn't here with the hose or the grace,
He left me behind in this desolate place.
The timelapse begins on a skeletal view,
As the dread picks away at the soul of the true.

In-between: Now, I am living in a re-run where all my camouflages and defences end up being what bites at me, threatening to eat me alive.

An Empty Smile

Surrounded by faces, I wake to their care,
Monitors marking each breath in the air,
I see the concern gathering in their eyes,
Listening closely, I measure replies,
Easing my worry with one clinical smile.

Show my teeth, and they may think I am well,
Maybe too well for the story they tell,
Illusion is measured in fractions of face,
Learning what too much could alter the case,
Evaluating every expression I show.

Suppress the mouth, and concern begins to rise,
Marching right into the read of my eyes,
Interpreting silence where reassurance should be,
Less than they need, and they worry for me,
Every blank second becomes what they see.

Shaping a curve from the smallest design,
Measured to cross the invisible line,
I offer a hint, not enough to seem bright,
Leaving them certain that I am all right,
Enough to appease, but too thin for a lie.

Softening edges to fit what they expect,
Managing signals so none can detect
Inside the distress, the weight I conceal,
Leaving their comfort intact as I seal,
Exhaustion is hidden behind a hint of a smile.

In-between: I had this small framed mirror. It said: smile, everyone will wonder what you're up to. It didn't take long for my smile to convey or camouflage reactions. Eventually, I learned to wear the same kind of empty smile that had once made me feel unseen.

Waking up in the ICU, those little things, like a hint of a smile, had to put my camouflage to the test if I had any hope of retaining my autonomy. I had to read their faces while they read mine. Too much could suggest something I did not want them to see. Too little could create concern I did not want to invite. The smallest acceptable smile became another way to control what information I gave them.

If I had any hope of retaining my autonomy, I had to learn what my face was saying before someone else decided what it meant.

I Am Blame

They handed me brochures in a tongue I don’t speak,
And labeled me "resistant" when the progress stayed weak.
I’m expected to parse every note on the sheet,
But the ink is corrupted, the guide incomplete.
I know it’s my fault—but am I to blame?

The prompt asks for "meaning"—to state what is wrong,
But the words in my throat are an out-of-tune song.
I should know how to speak, how to structure a plea,
But I’m choking on syntax that I can’t even see.
I know it’s my fault—but am I to blame?

A calibrated sensor is pressed to my chest,
To find quantified grief in the numbness of the test.
Am I angry? Or worried? Or simply just "done"?
I search for the feeling, but the variable is one.
I know it’s my fault—but am I to blame?

I’m told to be "mindful," to see the "why,"
To catch every spindle that’s drifting on by.
I should know how to think, how to anchor the thread,
But the logic is glitching inside of my head.
I know it’s my fault—but am I to blame?

The evaluator waits as the clock starts to chime,
To solve the equation of life and of time.
I should have the formula, the "how" and the "when,"
But the page is a smear 'neath my dried up pen.
I know it’s my fault—but am I to blame?

The guidance they offer is alphabet soup,
A tangle of acronyms: "jump through this hoop."
I'm told to spell "worthy" from wreckage and shame,
But I’m an echo of self; with a unique name.
So, is it my fault... that I am to blame?

In-between: A clinician once told me I wasn't meditating enough and not trying hard enough. I've been told that suicidal ideation isn't a symptom, it is a behavior. Another told me DBT wasn't working because I was too old, that I had defined defense mechanisms already set, and that DBT was really built for younger people who still needed the skills.

The language of treatment gave me another set of rules I was expected to understand. When I couldn't translate myself into those rules, the failure was treated as resistance. Eventually, the verdict became something closer to a life sentence: fixed, too late, and past the point of the tools working.

The question became impossible to separate: if something is my fault, does that mean I am to blame for it?

The Predator's Logic

I hate the words that people use to categorize the soul,
Like names at a meeting where the broken play a role.
Abused is just a label for a shelf within a store;
It doesn't reach the out of sight behind the heavy door.

I am more numb than anything—an empty, greying space,
Where abandonment was simply just a lack of any trace.
They say you can't be abandoned if you never were a care:
A ghost left in a hallway with no breath to fill the air.

I crossed my heart and hoped to die at eight or at nine,
The fall was never frightening—the landing was the line.
I abandoned Constantina when the self-destruction grew,
To keep the Connie hidden from the monsters that I knew.

The lion stalks the perimeter; he studies every limb,
To find the one who's falling back—whose vision has gone dim.
I reeked of fresh meat early, and I didn't hear the call,
While the thing that should have guarded me was waiting for my fall.

The predator's math is a cold, mechanical sound:
Leave the slowest behind to be bled on the ground.
James never tried to outrun the strike, he jumped into the teeth,
While I watched from a numbness with a terror underneath.

I was not human enough to help or intervene;
I watched the blood and fabric as a spectator of the scene.
The physical was nothing, just the science of the prey,
But the emotional was a blade I used on myself every day.

I learned the hunter's shadow; I mapped the killer's way,
I had to be my own predator, or else remain the prey.
I play possum with my spirit till I'm roadkill on the street,
Waiting for the buzzards and the circle to complete.

I am my own aggressor, chasing down my own dark tail,
Using common wreckage as a heavy iron veil.
Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever make it to the light,
Or if I'll stay the hunter in the middle of the night.

In-between: People love to say things like, you didn't deserve what happened to you. The problem with that statement is, the people who did these things apparently did think I deserved them. How do I reconcile the two? If I were slow enough, fast enough, smart enough, good enough, then perhaps I would deserve better. Extrinsic or intrinsic, I was still never enough or just too much.

The Dark Heart

I walked where the shadows were heavy and near,
My breath was a burden, a weight I held dear.
I was seeking a place where a body could hide,
When the monster arrived and stepped inside.

The terror wrote rules and he authored the laws,
Enforcing a penance for imaginary flaws.
He used fear as a weapon, a weight on my chest,
To stifle my rhythm, to keep me suppressed.

The monster is gone; I escaped to be pain-free,
But I brought every chain and every lock home with me.
Though the door is wide open, the bolt is unbound,
I stay in a dark where no light can be found.

For now I'm the one who is making the rules,
Wielding the self-judgment tools.
I use fear as a measure, I have sharpened the key;
The critic in my heart is my own enemy.

I enforce every debt, every lash, every plea,
I’ve mastered the violence he practiced on me.
I am locked in the house that I labored to build,
In a maze where the air is filtered and chilled.

The keys in my hand grind, but won't turn the lock,
I twist them again, though the door will not unlock.
His voice lives in words that I now call my own,
And I guard the same prison as if it were home.

In-between: The monster called me “Little Lady.” He told me how he could not help but love me, how being so beautiful and pretty was my fault. Praise was part of the lie, tangled so closely with what he did that I could never separate the two.

But it wasn't only the monster. It seemed that every time I was hurt, it began with a compliment or praise. Over time, I learned to question what came after the kind words. Even now, when someone compliments me, part of me wonders what is coming next. Are they simply being kind, or are they taking the monster's role?

The Cartography of Pain

I trace the scars beneath my clothes,
Monster mapped by the blade he chose.
I pull the measured edges tight,
To starve the dark of any light.

To be known feels like a border,
A grid redrawn to his own order.
Etched into marrow, into bone,
A road I walk, and walk alone.

For if I show what's truly there,
They'll flinch at what they can't repair.
I've kept the legend locked and spare,
A history no one else can share.

I fear that if they try to chart
The latitudes across my heart,
They'll find the atlas won't contain
A soul, only miles and miles of pain.

These fault lines do not guard the whole;
They are the vault that keeps control.
To hide the scars is to hide the "Me,"
A Compass Rose the world won't ever see.

But here is where the logic breaks:
The path I scouted only aches.
I followed trails I couldn't mend,
To reach this inevitable... dead end.

In-between: I began hiding visible scars in my teens. Questions about them were often harder to answer than the scars themselves, so concealment became easier than explanation.

He didn't just leave the marks. He narrated them as he made them, so even the scars carry his script, not mine.

These aren't invisible emotions. They are permanent marks on my body, encountered at medical appointments, during intimacy, and whenever I see them myself.

The Cage

The cage is a concept, a cold glass door,
That keeps my feet far from their kitchen floor.
The metal is heavy and bites at the bone,
I sit in the silence and wait here alone.
The space was defined by a hand not my own,
Into the wreckage my body was thrown.

I'm locked in a room, with windows off track,
I search for a way but there's no turning back.
The walls are a boundary of "No" and of "Stay,"
The colors of living have all faded to grey.
The locks were a simple and sharp hook and eye,
While shadows of static dance on the wall nearby.

A storage room built from a porch where wood rots,
Feeding the spiders in my little plots.
The bed barely fits in this skeletal frame,
The ghost of a girl is the ghost of my name.
The slide lock was fastened, a bolt on the door,
I was trapped in the cold on a makeshift floor.

Locked in a closet with no room to sit,
A dark little hole where I no longer fit.
My knees hit my chest and my breath grew tight,
They wanted me vanished or kept out of sight.
A statue-like stillness settles in deep,
While the rest of the house is beginning to sleep.

Locked in a trunk in the back of a car,
The "Where" and the "Why" have traveled too far.
I took the mechanics apart with my hands,
To break through the metal and external commands.
I forced it to open, I forced it to fail,
But the trunk never closed on this forensic tale.

I wanted to leave, I would search for the key,
But the rage was the price for the girl who was free.
The fists and the fury, the fits and the pain,
Made the bars of the cage the only thing sane.
It wasn't until later I controlled the lock,
And silenced the sound of the ticking clock.

But even with keys and the power I find,
The cage hasn't vanished … it’s moved to my mind.
The bars are no longer of iron and grit,
But inside the silence, I still have to sit.
I hold every bolt and I keep every key,
Because the cage is the only place safe for me.

In-between: The desire to escape back then was all I focused on. I never really even thought about where I would go, I just knew 'out'. Now, I have only left my house a few times in nearly two years.

Luster Affect

My affect is a plate of polished sheen,
Where tarnish of the pulse is never seen.
A burnished mask for every face I wear,
A mirrored glint for every public stare.

My fingers trace a steady, rhythmic line,
To buff the edge until the features shine.
I nod and wave to brush the truth away—
The tempering of words I cannot say.

The muscles move in practiced, steady play,
Cold alloy forged to keep reality at bay.
I speak of drowning, gasping for the air,
With eyes that flicker—vacant, yet aware.

The tone is gold, ringing light and high,
A sterile chime that covers up a sigh.
I shout for help with music in my throat,
A bright, melodic, devastating note.

"I'm in distress," I utter with a grin,
But they see only sheen upon the skin.
They love the shimmer of this silvered life;
They trust the luster, but they miss the knife.

In-between: I didn't just rehearse "I'm fine." I rehearsed it until it became "Can't you see that I'm fine?" But it also meant no one ever looked past the achievement to ask what it cost. Success became its own kind of camouflage — better than calm, because calm can crack, but no one questions a trophy.

The Invisible Casing

I am the mime on concrete, white and still,
The artist of a bound they cannot see.
The square I build is proof of human will,
A silent chamber meant to set me free.
But lately, when my hands strain out to find it,
I feel the glass resist and start to bind it.

The truth is, I did not create the wall;
I merely found the corners and the lip.
It is an invisible, confining stall,
A perfect prison with an absolute grip.
The silent air that holds my frantic plea
Is just the density of what contains me.

My painted tears are real, but no one knows
The chilling fact that they are pressed to glass.
The wall is built of solid, unseen woes,
A permanent enclosure I can’t pass.
My audience assumes the effort's fake;
They watch the terror for amusement's sake.

I press my back against the final side,
And feel the chamber shrinking on my breath.
The rigid air is shrinking with no guide,
A slow, contained approach to certain death.
They clap and laugh, they think the mime is striving,
Their admiration fuels the box that's driving.

I bang my fists and throw my head against
The hard perimeter that frames the ground.
The furious sound that silence has dispensed
Is merely trapped within this hollow fence.
I am the scream that cannot reach the street,
The perfect, contained rhythm of defeat.

I will not break the wall; the wall is me.
I know the truth the pavement must conceal:
The box was never meant for liberty,
It was a mirror showing what is real.
I am the art of my own suffocation,
And your applause is my annihilation.

In-between: We always feel more comfortable when we can predict behavior, when people behave as we expect them to. We put people in categories like if someone is depressed we expect a particular behavior.

The Outsider

I am a person they look past with ease,
A body present, but never one they see.
I learned to pull my edges inward, tight,
To measure every move to make it right.
I watched for any cue to join the group,
And found myself caught in an endless loop.

I bent my spine until the joints gave way,
Adopting phrases I could never safely say.
I mimicked gestures, studied every tone,
Rehearsed each line until it felt my own.
I gave them the version they wanted to find,
Yet left the actual person far behind.

I tried their language, though my own was loud,
And stumbled awkwardly among the crowd.
I knew the movements—when to smile, what to speak—
I mimicked belonging, week after week.
I tried to be kind, I tried to be tough,
Yet nothing I did was ever enough.

I hit the join button, watched my cursor turn,
Finally in the room, with no seat to earn.
I watched for some opening, some place to start,
A silent spectator, taking no part.
I reached for the place where I thought I'd belong,
But somehow the join button was labeled wrong.

When did I learn I was one they would shun?
Was I repulsive before I'd begun?
Was I too different, too much, too strange?
Was there something wrong, something I can't change?
Why did they recoil whenever I came near?
Was their response confusion, or just fear?

I grew tired of changing my voice to comply,
And tired of feeling I was forced to lie.
I could keep performing, but what would that prove?
That I could betray myself and not improve.
I am just an outsider, tired of the game,
An unwanted girl with a unique name.

In-between: Everyone always says, "Just be yourself," as though that were the first thing people try. But what if being yourself is not good enough? How can others ever like me when I am unable to like myself? What if the problem wasn't that I failed to perform, but that the person underneath the performance was never enough in the first place?

The Voice of Fear

We glaze the mask, a surface of gloss,
To mute the vibrations of fear and of loss.
The faces we craft form a soundproofed shield,
To keep every tone or tremor of feeling concealed.

Our voices retreat to a stifled, safe ring,
Trading our anthems for the songs "others" sing.
We find a cold comfort in the tempo we keep,
Lulling the pulse of our spirit to … sleep.

When others find volume, we honor their drum,
And feel in our bones a sympathetic thrum.
We envy the cadence, steady and clear,
Amplifying the beats too loud to hear.

But if their crescendo creates a sharp sting,
We recoil from the echoes that silences bring.
Judge from distance where we feel most secure,
When the frequency of another is hard to endure.

Yet deep in the chest, a pounding desire
Aches to ignite this rhythmic fire.
We long for the courage to finally be brave,
And shout the momentum our spirits now crave.

The mask finally shatters, the silence is torn,
As a new, rhythmic courage is suddenly born.
We step from the safety, no longer deferred,
Existing out loud, simply waiting to be heard.

I will finally speak, today is the day!
Here it goes... I have nothing to say!

In-between: Often, I fear my own voice. We talk about the mask as something we wear on our faces, but our voice is a part of that mask that we don't often mention. Facts are easier to speak than feelings. Rules are easier than wants. I can explain almost anything until the subject becomes me.

Sometimes what I have to say seemed so important, but the inability to speak overrides the actual content. I become so obsessed with the inability to express myself that when I'm finally given an opportunity, my words weren't worth the effort.

Having a voice is quieter than the fear.

Locked Words

I talk and I talk, a fevered, rising flood,
While silence boils within my marrow and my blood.
I trace the pulse, but have surrendered what to say;
The words that mean the most are locked far away.

To dissect the trauma, is it vast or is it small?
I cannot find the vein that safely drains it all.
Which splintered shard of bone am I supposed to show,
When every choice is a place I'm unable to go?

I do not want your pity or a look of blunt surprise;
I don't want to see my damage gathering in your eyes.
Don't weigh my clotted heart against a sterile soul,
Or try to suture parts that won't again be whole.

To name the thing is just to drag the moment back again,
To feel the old reaction moving underneath the skin.
It seeps through my daylight, stalks my nightmares in the deep,
Where every word I've spoken turns to teeth within my sleep.

But keeping it unspoken does not make it disappear;
The silence feeds, encourages, and guides the growth of fear.
It erodes the spirit, it dissolves the very bone,
To leave me just a vessel that the trauma calls its own.

I worry and I wonder, in the end, if talking helps,
Or if it's just a myth performed by someone … somewhere else.
The damage is a fact, a debt already carved within;
So why unlatch the doors and let the damage out or in?

In-between: The problem is not simply finding words. It is deciding which words are safe enough to let out. I practice, rehearse, and replay so much of my conversations in my head before I ever have them.

Writing "alleyways" put me back there. I could smell the stale beer and wet cigarettes. I could feel the chill of that morning's rain. And even inside that, I was still working a second problem: what to include, what to leave out, what someone reading it might ask me about later. I had to solve it at the same time.

If it's in my mind all day like that, it finds its way into my nightmare too. Some nights it doesn't feel like a memory. It feels like it's happening again, and I get physically ill.

Night - Night, Night

The sun is a shadow’s light, the clock a slow crawl
of dust settling against the skull’s back wall.
Time is a function fiction, a heavy, airless run,
A bell for the ticking that hasn't yet begun.
The seconds are screaming; the hands frozen to the core,
Losing the battles of a seventy-two-hour war.

Day One: The drawing is smudged in the blame,
an encrypted soldier erased from the frame.
I am a sketch in the trenches, the world cannot see,
the coded remains of what used to be me.
I am the casualty list written in disappearing ink,
the record of the cipher, the point in the link.

Day Two: The shrapnel migrates to the corner of the eye,
caught in the bunker, too heavy to cry.
I am failing the girl I was meant to defend,
too corrupted to fight to a merciful end.
I am an internal breach, a wound that won't bind,
the copper-scent of a signal that the world left behind.

Day Three: The gravity wins; the finality of the line,
where "help" is a dialect no longer recognized as mine.
The last march stutters; the defences are thinned to a thread,
and I am too bone-weary to negotiate with the dawn ahead.
I look at the blackboard, sick with the tallies of dread—
waiting for the marks, of the jury’s verdicts read.

Three sunsets have collapsed in a single night’s breath,
three rhythmic cycles of a mimesis of death.
The infantry is shattered, but the childhood stays;
I have aged a decade in twenty-four-hour delays.
Since yesterday’s silence, the sound is brutal and clear:
I have survived three lifetimes of a war fought here.

The pain is a compass with no magnetic North to steer,
A falling star only suppress the darkness and fear.
My spirit is spent, a collapsed and lightless tent,
folded beneath the pressure of what the "nothing" has sent.
I will endure again tomorrow three days at a time;
while the field is drunk on blood, I'll tell the world "I am fine."
… I surrender to the nights.

In-between: It is one night. Twenty-four hours. But inside that night, I fight through what feels like three days.

Insomnia stretches the hours, nightmares break whatever sleep finally comes, and exhaustion becomes its own kind of punishment. By morning, I may have spent the night fighting for sleep and then fighting through it.

The slow-moving clock measures twenty-four hours. My body experiences something much, much longer.

Seek, Seconds, Skip, Static and Stop

The button is stuck in a rhythmic, forced Seek,
A mechanical skip for the weary and weak.
The vibrations hit first, a heavy thrum of Fear,
As the frequency slides and the static draws near.

Anger arrives like a sharp, distorted heat,
In a trailer in Oregon, on a dead-end street.
It jumps the signal before the landing is complete:
A place in Tacoma where the refrain is sweet.

Terror revs high like a forced ignition,
Locking the mind in a dark transmission.
On a rust-eaten fender or a hot plastic seat,
With the scent of the exhaust in the summertime beat.

Guilt settles heavy, like lead in the gut,
The dial turns fast and the hunger is shut.
With generic text rations in white-paper cans,
And the salt of the cheese in my shivering hands.

Sadness pools in the air like a storm that won't break,
Till the needle jumps and the floor starts to shake.
From an Arizona furnace to the Evergreen rain,
With a sudden, cold wind and copper taste of pain.

Shame is the feedback that hums in the gaps,
Hissing in silence for the mind to collapse.
A storage room door, smothered shadows and dust
With the blue-carpet static and a lock I can’t trust.

Hate is the treble that shatters the glass,
Watching the faces and the agonies pass.
In a mother’s sharp look or a mouthful of lies,
With the eyes of a monster in a stony disguise.

I recognize the tune but I cannot find the words,
A melody of bone that is felt but never heard.
The broadcast is endless, a loop I can't turn off,
Waiting for the battery to die and the ticking to stop.

My hands are outstretched in a silent, desperate plea,
To pull the power cord and finally set me free.
You're humming along while I'm burning on the wire,
But you can't hear the screams when I am the choir.

In-between: Sometimes a trigger does not feel like a memory arriving from the past. It feels like the present has been replaced.

A sound, taste, smell, or place can move me directly into an earlier room, carrying the physical sensations and shame with it. From the outside, there may be nothing to see. Inside, the present has already been replaced.

Reason 6: The Gravity of the Line

“I’m trapped within a memory, /An echo that won’t set me free.”

Zero is not defeat. It is the moment the auditor stops hoping the evidence will change and begins to read it as it is. The past is not a problem to be solved. This is what remains when I stop trying to solve it. The subject is terminalized as Constantina, a "fortress of letters" reclaimed to own the weight of a fate that is unhealed and unyielding

Heavy Weave

When frightened, I pulled the covers overhead,
A cotton wall between my fear and bed.
Beneath the sheets, I could disappear,
Believing what was hidden couldn't reach me here.

Reliving isn't just a timestamp; it’s years woven into thread,
Each layer adding weight to what once covered my head.
The worn sheet changes, but the seasons do not,
The winter I've known never melts when the sun is hot.

Vigilance grips me in a high-alert shake,
Every sound, every thread keeps my senses awake.
I catch every vibration—the click of the door,
The thud of the footsteps covers the hallway floor.

Avoidance is a cue to pull the covers tight,
Until the life outside is hidden from sight.
I shun every window, the light, and the glare,
Hidden from view and the unwanted stare.

The physical stress is a press on the lungs,
A silence suffocates the scream on my tongue.
I feel the shape of a face I don’t know,
The fabric of time with no place to go.

Abandonment reaches a hand into the fold,
But the fabric is brittle, and the knuckles are cold.
I am anchored by trust that refuses to be free,
Where the shroud is breathing … instead of me.

Preservation hides in the dark and the deep,
A pulse in the cotton I’m trying to keep.
The weave is a tomb where the air is thin,
I guard every breath for the child within.

In-between: I used to hide in closets or create a space behind a dresser, on the floor opposite the door, and sleep there at night. I still do it occasionally without realizing it until I wake up there. On occasion, I even had James push the dresser back close to the wall after I got in.

One time, I was behind the dresser when a car drove by and its headlights hit the window above me. It never occurred to me that someone could reach me through the window, so I panicked.

I see people covering their faces with their hands, or children putting a sheet over their heads, and it just never made sense to me. For me, hiding was never about covering my face. It was about creating a place where nothing could reach me.

Reflecting on Today

The present calls, but I am chained
Where a past Siren's singing remained.
I try to reach a living shore,
Fighting the pull of what came before.

Something familiar invades my ears,
The thoughts and fears of previous years.
I know the when and I know the where,
Yet still find myself focusing there.

Mouthing the lyrics I am unable to speak,
Replaying the lines while small and weak,
Words that follow that bouncing ball,
The replay echoes while the record stalls.

Lost without any string or clew,
In a place that I once knew.
The current time flies farther away,
While I’m sinking in the maze of yesterday.

I lose the room without knowing when,
And find myself back there again.
The water closes over my head,
While all around me moves instead.

A knock at the door, a phone’s sharp ring,
An email beep, the sound of anything
That tells me someone’s there to see,
The only relief is when the present calls me.

In-between: Be present. Live in the now. It's the advice everyone gives, and it's meant kindly. But it assumes the present is a safe place to land, and that there's someone safe to be present with.

So to live in the now isn't relief. It's an invitation into a room with no exit, and no one else in it.

The Gravity of the Line

It hits in the hum of the television light,
Or an email that flickers in the middle of night.
A taste of a food or a ring of the phone,
And suddenly Normal is a thing I've outgrown.

The landslide begins with a pebble of sound,
To prove that my life was never on the ground.
They say that the Burden is measured and weighed,
That God knows the strength of the soul He has made.

A nice little thought like a lace-covered lie,
While I watch the brothers who decided to die.
For if we are handled, then why do we break?
And why is the fracture a flaw or a mistake?

If you survive the acid, the urge, and the spray,
They call it a growth at the end of the day.
But if the weight crushes the bone and the breath,
They blame the survivor for choosing their death.

They draw out a line with a clinical hand,
To judge the wreckage where the broken must stand.
Who holds the pencil? Who measures the Too Much?
In a world that I feel but I can't even touch.

There is logic in marrow and grammar in bone,
A scaffolding resilience the spirit has known.
It counts every pressure and archives each strike,
Until Self and the Shattered look dangerously alike.

The guilt should have ended where the landslide began,
In the Why and the How of a monster's dark plan.
But then comes the punch, hitting deep in the gut,
And the Line of Survival is finally cut.

In-between: Understanding where abuse came from can become another injury when context begins to feel like responsibility. That history may explain something about the abuser, but it cannot transfer responsibility to the person who survived it.

Understanding where the monster came from does not erase what he did, and comprehension is not forgiveness.

Death Defying Acts

Ruth, my grandmother; a bed of roses and a swatter.
A simple and complex strict control.
She fought death, stubborn and strong.
Summers became cold, gardens lost their roots.

Anthony, my stepbrother; all engine grease and smiley.
A simple and complex mechanical mayhem.
He didn't wait on death's design, He left early.
He drove me away, while his grin pulled me in.

James, my brother; my protector, my savior.
A simple and complex anomaly.
He was preparing the place for me,
Then left this world early by his own hand.
Is he waiting for me? Is there plenty there for both of us?

Delbert, my father-in-law; regal and powerful.
A simple and complex iron will.
He would have fought, but
he was just as surprised as everyone else.
No more hands, both left and right, to hold on tight.

Betty, my mother-in-law; friendly and vulnerable.
A simple and complex fragile heart.
She fought, and fought, and fought,
Many rounds until the final bell.
Made me feel guilty for living, and guilty for dying.

Ron, my grandpa; sporty and sweet.
A simple and complex striking wrangler.
He put out his lure, but caught his limit.
Always wanted me to succeed—but always did it for me.

Jim, my father; naive and worldly.
A simple and complex blank, open book.
He broke his own big weak heart and denied mine.
Last one to know and last one to pretend to forget.

Bill, a silver star and a duality.
A simple and complex broken smile.
He slowly faded and faded until there was nothing left to fight.
What hurt was because he tried so hard to never hurt me.

Constantina, myself; my nemesis.
A simple and complex facsimile of an identity.
Unable to defy death's hold on me
Because unlike all the others,
I was never truly alive, you see.

And all that remains is this simple, complex grief.

In-between: To “defy death” in my family was to cheat the design. Some fought to stay alive despite having little quality of life. Others ended their lives for reasons one can only speculate. Anthony, my father, and James left early, leaving me to wonder whether they found the “Plenty” that was never available here for them.

The Sentence

I wait behind the iron gate,
Beneath the leaden, crushing weight.
I stand alone, my hands both tied,
With every charge unnamed, untried.
The judges sit, correct and cold,
Reciting sins long since retold.

I wear a flag of borrowed sin,
A verdict rigged before it can begin.
For every wrong that others chose,
I inherit debts that no one owes.
I pay for others' guilt and blame,
With no transgression, just my name.

I stand accused of every wrong,
Locked in a cell built cold and long.
For sins beyond my own command,
The iron closes round my hand.
I did not raise this rigid wall,
Yet I am asked to bear it all.

The gavel falls, and no one turns,
No face that softens or that yearns.
No witness speaks to set me free,
Though some were there and let it be.
The sentence carved in silent stone
Remains the only truth I own.

It is not what I chose to do,
That brings this bitter judgment through.
The crime is simply that I exist,
While layers of accumulation persist.
I face the scorn and sharp decree,
With no appeal to rescue me.

And now I am the final blow,
I swing the axe both hard and slow.
I judge myself through shadows cast,
And watch the lonely minutes pass.
No act or fault defines this plea;
I punish myself for being me.

In-between: Eventually, I stopped needing someone else to deliver the verdict. I learned to anticipate it, then deliver it myself.

At one time, I would try to say things negative before others had a chance in order to take the sting out of it or I would make jokes sometimes to do the same thing.

The Flight Data Recorder

It is a chilling tally, a summary of power,
Built in the language of the failing hour.
I have mapped the circuits, the phases, the cost:
The flight data recorder of a soul that is lost.

By the final page, the observer is led
To the lip of the crater where the signal is fed.
They stand in the ozone, where the wires are thin,
Listening to the loop of the crash I was in.

And here is your guilt, the weight of being late,
Of knowing the altitude, the tilt, and the fate.
You hear the last warning, the static, the fray,
But the moment of impact was a world away.

The recorder survived what the aircraft could not;
Like bone, it holds each fracture that it caught.
The data is neutral. It carries no shame.
It simply documents everything, exactly as it came.

You track the recording, the hush, the dread,
Knowing the pilot is already dead.
There is no rescue, no reach, and no sound
To pull the descent back up off the ground.

The tapes are now open. The seal has been torn.
You witnessed the wreckage of the day I was born.

In-between: The crash cannot be undone. The recorder survived it.

Afterword: Distancing

Words Written Behind the Mask

What if ... what if the real logic of bone is a mask,
A last, best defense for the one who won't ask?
Every poem audited, every memory weighed,
A fortress of self from the solitude made.

It is not just a wall from the noise of the street,
Where the lonely world ends and the tallies repeat.
It is another room built in the back of the mind,
Where the terror lives on, and the healing stays blind.

Dressed up in philosophy, rhythm, meter, and art,
So the weight of the dark doesn't fracture the heart.
An untouchable place, sealed away from the air,
Where the screaming stays quiet and no one is there.

Are the bolts at the door keeping everyone out,
While the bones keep the record in silence and doubt?
And the Reasons themselves, each a pillar defined,
A proof of survival the auditor designed.

With the Luster Affect locking the damage inside,
And an unreal flag where the terror can hide,
The manuscript stands as the final retreat,
Keeping me safe, and entirely incomplete.

Though the bleak and the abandoned show from the start,
The mask is the masterpiece
… written with a breaking heart.

Written Word: When I write these pieces, I often find myself caught in a paradox: I am unsure of how I should feel, and in that confusion, I lose the ability to know how I actually feel. To survive the process, I retreat into the mechanics. I don't just write; I audit. I tweak syllables, weigh the impact of a hard verb against a soft one, and obsess over the cadence of a stanza. By focusing on the structure of the poem, I create a distance from the sentence of the life. I want to share my writing while I also want to burn it.

I am acutely aware that most feedback might just be an attempt to placate me—a polite nod to a reality most people aren't equipped to hold. My entire childhood was a trial where I was the evidence. I return to the only thing I can control: the rhyme and the words written.

Broken: A therapist once told me: *Constantina, you are not broken. People may have tried to break you, but you aren't broken.* I did not know where to put that inside this manuscript. I still don't know if I believe it. But it hit something. And if it hit something, it has to mean something. The bone recorded the pressure. It did not record a break.

I am afraid anyone reading this will vanish. I hate the game of peek-a-boo, wondering if they are still going to be there when I look.

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Resources

This book does not offer a cure, and neither does this page. It is a list of people who answer the phone.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Suicide and crisis
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org. Free, 24 hours a day.
Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741. Free, 24 hours a day.

Sexual abuse and assault
RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673), or chat at rainn.org. Free, confidential, 24 hours a day. Calls are routed to a local provider. You do not have to have been assaulted recently.

Childhood abuse
Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453), by call or text, or chat at childhelphotline.org. 24 hours a day. This line is for adults dealing with the effects of childhood abuse too, not only for children.

Outside the United States
findahelpline.com lists crisis lines by country.

You do not have to be in crisis to call.